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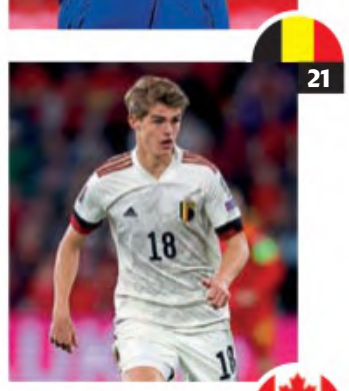

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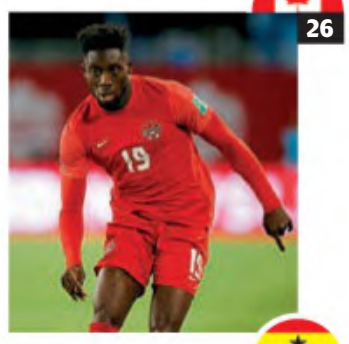

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The global game caught on camera

England...Bobby Moore receives the 1966 World Cup trophy from the late HM Queen Elizabeth II

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FROM THE EDITOR

With just one month to go until Qatar 2022 kicks off, and in the final issue before *World Soccer*'s renowned World Cup special goes on sale, this edition presents us with the perfect opportunity to highlight the players to watch at what will be a groundbreaking tournament.

This World Cup will be an historic occasion for many reasons – it will be the first winter World Cup (for northern-hemisphere nations), the first to take place in the Middle East, and the first since the second edition back in 1934 to feature hosts never to have appeared at the finals previously. It will also be particularly poignant for England supporters to hear the Three Lions proudly sing, "God Save The *King*" at a World Cup finals following the momentous passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. We join the world and the rest of the wider football community in sending our deepest condolences to the Royal Family.

We join the world and the rest of the wider football community in sending our deepest condolences to the Royal Family

World Cups always seem to throw up moments of raw emotion and inspiration, evocative stories, major shocks and revelations, and in this issue we take a closer look at some of the potential headline-makers in Qatar – whether it be an effervescent Canada looking to make their mark at a first World Cup since 1986 (page 26); Sadio Mane hoping to make history with African champions Senegal (page 40); or innumerable World Cup wild cards ready to make an impact on the biggest stage, such as Belgium's Charles De Ketelaere (page 21), Croatia's Marko Livaja (page 24), Ghana's Felix Afena-Gyan (page 64) or 50 other stars (page 46) all with their own interesting back-stories and hopes of fulfilling personal ambitions.

Aside from the World Cup, we also bring you features from Norway, Australia, Spain, Palestine, Liechtenstein, India and South America in this issue, but the focus is undoubtedly on Qatar 2022. With that being said, ensure you don't miss our bumper World Cup special on sale October 19 – it's the only preview to Qatar 2022 you'll need.

Stephen Fishlock, Group Editor

UK

Home nations managers pay tribute to the Queen

The managers of England and Northern Ireland's senior international sides have paid their respects following the death of HM Queen Elizabeth II.

Sarina Wiegman, who led the Lionesses to their first major trophy this summer, said: "This summer she [the Queen] took the time to write to me and my players congratulating us for our success. In that letter she called us an 'inspiration for girls and women'. It is you, your Majesty, who was the inspiration with your unrelenting work ethic, leadership, dignity and kindness.

"The national anthem, sung with such respect by my players and staff, served as a reminder of what she meant to the country. The words 'send her victorious' – a line written on our shirts, but was also in our hearts."

Gareth Southgate also offered his condolences, before confirming that England would pay tribute in late September: "The team will have the chance to pay our respects at our fixture with Germany later this month. An occasion that will, of course, bring to mind the World Cup final in 1966 and

"The World Cup is not my problem. Juventus' problem is that [Paul Pogba] comes back in January"

Juventus coach Massimiliano Allegri reveals that France's Paul Pogba could miss the World Cup after having knee surgery

Tribute...West Ham United display a picture of Bobby Moore receiving the 1966 World Cup trophy from HM Queen Elizabeth II during their Europa Conference League match against FCSB

the moment when Her Majesty handed the Jules Rimet trophy to Bobby Moore. As Wembley and the country falls silent, I will think of that and her 70 years of impeccable duty."

Northern Ireland men's national team manager Ian Baraclough said: "I am saddened to hear about the passing of Queen Elizabeth II. She was much loved and respected all over the world and will be missed enormously."

Kenny Shiels, the manager of the women's team, added: "I feel like we are all indebted to this fantastic human being. She always sought peace and was able to reassure her people with a trusting emphasis to bring us through the Troubles in our small province. God bless her."

UEFA

Benzema voted UEFA Men's Player of the Year

After firing Real Madrid to Champions League glory last season, Karim Benzema has been named UEFA Men's Player of the Year for 2021-22.

The Frenchman, who is also the odds-on favourite to win this year's Ballon d'Or award on October 17, was the runaway winner, with Manchester City midfielder Kevin De Bruyne a distant second and Benzema's Madrid team-mate Thibaut Courtois in third.

The month in numbers

Eye-catching facts and stats from the world of football this month...

9
Goals scored by both Celtic and Liverpool at the end of August in thrashings over Dundee United and Bournemouth respectively.

4
Year contract handed to Wales manager Rob Page ahead of the 2022 World Cup.

185
The previous record for most Premier League goals scored at a single club, before Tottenham Hotspur's Harry Kane broke Sergio Aguero's tally for Manchester City.

€1.2bn
Valuation of Milan following their takeover by American investment group RedBird Capital.

Welcome to Olympiakos... Marcelo arrives at the Greek giants

20,000
Olympiakos fans that greeted former Brazil and Real Madrid left-back Marcelo after his unveiling at the Georgios Karaiskakis Stadium.

8
Clubs fined by UEFA for breaching Financial Fair Play rules: Paris Saint-Germain, Milan, Internazionale, Roma, Juventus, Besiktas, Marseille and Monaco.

4
Bids to host the 2030 World Cup after Egypt, Greece and Saudi Arabia teamed up to form a combined inter-confederational bid.

100
Exact number of Chelsea matches managed by Thomas Tuchel before the German was sacked by the Premier League club.

€200m
Amount that Barcelona will have to reduce their outgoings by over the next year, according to La Liga boss Javier Tebas.

£430.8m
Total earnings by agents during the summer transfer window, according to a FIFA report.

15
Months since Hakim Ziyech's last game for Morocco, before the Chelsea forward was recalled for September's internationals.

£400k
Transfer fee paid by Barcelona for Manchester City midfielder Keira Walsh, replacing Chelsea's Pernille Harder as the world's most expensive female player.

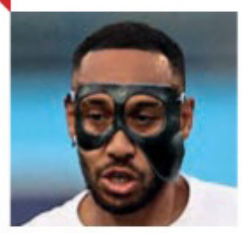
8,000
Planned expansion to Premier League club Leicester City's King Power Stadium.

15
Chinese Super League matches called off during one week in September after a sharp rise in COVID-19 cases across the clubs.

39
People injured – including supporters and police – after violent clashes in the Europa Conference League tie between Nice and Cologne at the Allianz Riviera.

19
Saves made by Borussia Monchengladbach goalkeeper Yann Sommer – a Bundesliga record – during his side's 1-1 draw with Bayern Munich at the Allianz Arena.

Super stopper... Sommer makes one of his saves



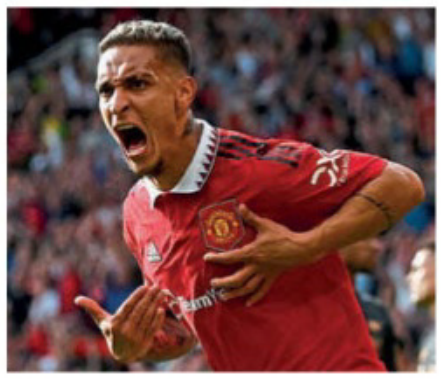
"Violent cowards broke into our home and threatened my family and my children…They injured my jaw…The feeling that we are no longer safe in our own home is hard to understand and describe"

Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang posts on social media shortly before leaving Barcelona to join Chelsea

MOST EXPENSIVE DEALS IN SUMMER TRANSFER WINDOW

£85.5m	**ANTONY**	*(Ajax to Manchester United)*
£72.36m	**Wesley FOFANA**	*(Leicester City to Chelsea)*
£72m	**Aurelien TCHOUAMENI**	*(Monaco to Real Madrid)*
£67.5m	**Darwin NUNEZ**	*(Benfica to Liverpool)*
£63.59m	**CASEMIRO**	*(Real Madrid to Manchester United)*
£63m	**Alexander ISAK**	*(Real Sociedad to Newcastle United)*
£60.3m	**Matthijs DE LIGT**	*(Juventus to Bayern Munich)*
£58.77m	**Marc CUCURELLA**	*(Brighton to Chelsea)*
£54m	**Erling HAALAND**	*(Borussia Dortmund to Manchester City)*
£52.2m	**RICHARLISON**	*(Everton to Tottenham Hotspur)*
£52.2m	**RAPHINHA**	*(Leeds United to Barcelona)*
£51.63m	**Lisandro MARTINEZ**	*(Ajax to Manchester United)*
£50.58m	**Raheem STERLING**	*(Manchester City to Chelsea)*
£46.98m	**Gabriel JESUS**	*(Manchester City to Arsenal)*
£45m	**Jules KOUNDE**	*(Sevilla to Barcelona)*
£45m	**Cristian ROMERO**	*(Atalanta to Tottenham Hotspur)**
£44.1m	**Kalvin PHILLIPS**	*(Leeds United to Manchester City)*
£40.5m	**Robert LEWANDOWSKI**	*(Bayern Munich to Barcelona)*
£40.5m	**Matheus NUNES**	*(Sporting to Wolves)*
£38.66m	**Lucas PAQUETA**	*(Lyon to West Ham United)*
£37.35m	**VITINHA**	*(Porto to Paris Saint-Germain)*
£36.9m	**BREMER**	*(Torino toJuventus)*
£36m	**Federico CHIESA**	*(Fiorentina toJuventus)**
£34.2m	**Nuno MENDES**	*(Sporting to Paris Saint-Germain)**
£34.2m	**Kalidou KOULIBALY**	*(Napoli to Chelsea)*
£33.3m	**Sven BOTMAN**	*(Lille to Newcastle United)*
£32.4m	**Gianluca SCAMACCA**	*(Sassuolo to West Ham United)*
£31.5m	**Fabio VIEIRA**	*(Porto to Arsenal)*
£31.5m	**Nayef AGUERD**	*(Rennes to West Ham United)*
£31.5m	**Oleksandr ZINCHENKO**	*(Manchester City to Arsenal)*
£31.5m	**Amadou ONANA**	*(Lille to Everton)*
£29.56m	**Brenden AARONSON**	*(Red Bull Salzburg to Leeds United)*
£29.34m	**Goncalo GUEDES**	*(Valencia to Wolves)*
£28.8m	**Sadio MANE**	*(Liverpool to Bayern Munich)*
£28.8m	**Charles DE KETELAERE**	*(Club Brugge to Milan)*
£28.13m	**Steven BERGWIJN**	*(Tottenham Hotspur to Ajax)*
£27.9m	**Diego CARLOS**	*(Sevilla to Aston Villa)*
£27.9m	**Sebastien HALLER**	*(Ajax to Borussia Dortmund)*
£27m	**Karim ADEYEMI**	*(Red Bull Salzburg to Borussia Dortmund)*
£26.55m	**Morgan GIBBS-WHITE**	*(Wolves to Nottingham Forest)*
£26.28m	**Yves BISSOUMA**	*(Brighton to Tottenham Hotspur)*
£25.2m	**Amine GOUIRI**	*(Nice to Rennes)*
£23.4m	**David RAUM**	*(Hoffenheim to RB Leipzig)*
£22.5m	**Luis SINISTERRA**	*(Feyenoord to Leeds United)*
£21.87m	**Nathan COLLINS**	*(Burnley to Wolves)*
£21.6m	**Dwight McNEIL**	*(Burnley to Everton)*
£21.24m	**Joaquin CORREA**	*(Lazio to Internazionale)**
£20.7m	**FABIAN Ruiz**	*(Napoli to Paris Saint-Germain)*
£20.7m	**Calvin BASSEY**	*(Rangers to Ajax)*
£20.34m	**Cheick DOUCOURE**	*(Lens to Crystal Palace)*

**Loan move turned permanent*
Fees according to: www.transfermarkt.co.uk



ANTONY

By joining Manchester United on the final day of the transfer window, the Brazilian became the most expensive deadline-day signing in history, and took the Premier League's total spending to somewhere near £1.9 billion for the summer – beating the previous record of £1.4bn, set in 2017. Antony is also the third ex-Ajax player to move to Old Trafford this summer, following Lisandro Martinez and Christian Eriksen. It is a price that has been baulked at by many observers – the 22-year-old scored eight and assisted four goals in last season's Eredivisie – but the left-footed winger will undoubtedly add plenty of skill, invention and entertainment to United's attack.

Wesley FOFANA

The French centre-back threatened to rival Cristiano Ronaldo and Frenkie de Jong as the summer's biggest transfer sagas that never happened, until Chelsea finally got the deal over the line at the end of August. For the second summer in a row, the Blues spent more than £200m, with Fofana their biggest outlay. Remarkably, the 22-year-old has signed a seven-year deal at Stamford Bridge, indicating that the club believes he can form the backbone of their defence for the rest of the decade.

Matthijs DE LIGT

The Dutchman's move from Turin to Bavaria was the second biggest transfer of the summer not involving an English club. Having just turned 23, De Ligt has already racked up something close to €150m in transfer fees, yet is arguably still waiting to display the form that saw him captain Ajax to a Champions League semi-final in 2019 when he was still a teenager. Bayern, however, seem like the perfect fit for him, and he indicated so by scoring on his first Bundesliga start, a 7-0 win over Bochum.

Alexander ISAK

The Magpies appeared to be set for a sensible, low-key window in their first summer under their Saudi owners – until they smashed their transfer record by signing the Sweden striker from Real Sociedad. Not that the 22-year-old represents reckless business. While last season's La Liga goal return of six was disappointing, he struck 17 the season before and helped *La Real* win the 2019-20 Copa del Rey (the final of which took place in April 2021 due to COVID). A teenage prodigy when signed by Borussia Dortmund from Swedish side AIK in January 2017, he now seems set to fulfil his rich potential.

FABIAN Ruiz

One of the glaring flaws in PSG's recruitment over the last few years has been in midfield, with their various Champions League failures often attributed to a lack of control in the centre of park. This summer has been different though, with the arrivas of Vitinha from Porto, Renato Sanches (Lille), Carlos Soler (Valencia) and, late on, Fabian. As one of the cornerstones of Napoli's midfield over the last four seasons, the Spain international has often drawn admiring glances from Europe's biggest clubs, and now has his chance with the French champions. He was named Player of the Tournament as Spain won the Euro Under-21s in 2019, starring in midfield alongside his new team-mate, Soler.

Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

Denmark and football fairy tales: 40 years of *World Soccer*

The kid was special; anyone could see that. He was just 17, still at school, but already the finest footballer in the Danish first division when I first saw him in the summer of 1982 playing for Brondby in a 1-1 draw with B93.

Michael Laudrup was the name – and this magazine was the obvious place to announce his talent. So, I tapped away on a typewriter, put a stamp on the envelope, and posted the article to *World Soccer* where it appeared 40 years ago this month.

A generation of magnificent talent from Denmark was just emerging, and it was my good fortune to be able to chronicle the ups and downs of the Danish Dynamite team of Soren Lerby, Preben Elkjaer, Allan Simonsen, Frank Arnesen, Morten Olsen and, the best of them all, young Laudrup.

I was back in Copenhagen in 1985 to see Denmark beat the Soviet Union 4-2 in a wondrous World Cup qualifier known simply as "The Match".

That's how Arnesen and Olsen described it to me, as did Jan Molby. When I asked Laudrup about the occasion he jumped out of his chair and recreated a scene from the game. He had scored twice, but the moment he recalled was a mesmerising Soviet attack, going through a litany of passes and backheels inside the Denmark penalty area until a final shot was cleared off the line.

"We were winning 4-2, but if they'd scored then, the Soviets would have won," Laudrup told me.

Soviet manager Eduard Malofeyev was astounded. "Don't bother asking me questions," he said. "All I can say is that my team just played a great match, the best match we will ever play, and we still lost."

After that the press were invited into the Denmark dressing room. Bottles of beer were handed round as players and reporters drank together and discussed the game. It was a different world then.

I have attended many games since, but never one to equal it – not even Germany 1-5 England in 2001, nor the majestic Barcelona performance that bewildered Manchester United in the 2011 Champions League final.

Danish Dynamite... the legendary team of 1992 celebrate winning the Euros

But this is not a lament for a lost age. Overall, football has improved immeasurably in the last 40 years. The technique, speed and tactical excellence of modern players are a marvel. So are the standard of pitches, the comfort and safety of stadiums, and the quality and breadth of media coverage.

But there have been unwelcome developments too; particularly a loss of essential sportsmanship in a game scarred by blatant cheating, feigning injury to get opponents sent off, and time-wasting. The introduction of VAR has been a huge mistake.

> This is not a lament for a lost age. Overall, football has improved immeasurably in the last 40 years

If there is a lament here, it is that Michael Laudrup fell out with Danish national team coach Richard Moller Nielsen in the early 1990s and missed out on Denmark's fairy-tale triumph at Euro 1992. His younger brother Brian Laudrup was the star instead.

The Danes have had their moments since. Morten Olsen was coach when they knocked world champions France out of the 2002 World Cup, and still in charge to pick a teenage Christian Eriksen for the 2010 tournament.

When I interviewed Eriksen for a profile piece in this magazine in 2013 he was word perfect – intelligent, ambitious, yet humble and understated. He was another special kid, which helps to explain the outpouring of emotion when he suffered a cardiac arrest on the pitch last year during Euro 2020.

Eriksen is now on course to play for Denmark in Qatar where, under the admirable leadership of coach Kasper Hjulmand, they will be among the favourites to reach the latter stages.

Eriksen's story is incredible, one which shows there is always another chapter ahead to chronicle – whether tapped out on the noisy typewriter that still lies in the corner of my study or a slim laptop computer relentlessly connected to the world.

Keir RADNEDGE
THE INSIDER

United for sale? Not likely

Sir Jim Ratcliffe has been commonly labelled, in headline-writers' shorthand, as "Britain's richest man." How anyone knows this for a fact in a financial world awash with hidden ownerships, nominee appointments and tax havens is a mystery. However, the mere mention of his name in the same sentence as that of Manchester United was enough to fire the rumour mill into overdrive.

Most likely the Ratcliffe flurry will end up as a minor footnote to the season. After all, the Glazers draw down £20 million each year from their leveraged buyout of United. They also have skins as thick as their wallets. United's overall income stream remains sky-high, whether Premier League champions or not. Why should they sell up? No reason.

Yet if nothing else the Ratcliffe mirage so early in the new season provides reason to explore the class of the super-rich owner and consider for which lever he – or she or they – will next pull for cash.

Given that Ratcliffe is not exactly in the Sir Richard Branson class of self-promotional entrepreneurs, this sudden propulsion into the limelight may not have been exactly welcome for him.

On the other hand, the Glazers can only have been delighted. They had been reported in the United States, where United are quoted on the New York Stock Exchange, as considering selling a minority shareholding: publicity about a potential Ratcliffe interest could only hike its value.

The Premier League has seen a steady creep in the minority stake game. The concept works both ways.

Firstly, a majority owner can maintain control of the club while garnering a cost-free financial injection to support transfer and wages expenditure from an eager new investor keen to show their commitment in cash as well as words.

Secondly, the new investor gains the kudos of a stake in the world's most popular national league while also being placed – if they wish at a later date – to pursue full control.

Premier League club ownership remains the gold standard of world football. The reasons were set out starkly in the latest Deloitte annual review of football finance. Deloitte stated: "Despite the absence of fans for the majority of the 2020-21 season the size of the European football market in revenue grew by 10 per cent to €27.6bn...the 'big five' European leagues recorded total revenue of €15.6bn, an increase of three per cent from 2019-20."

Leading the way came Premier League clubs whose overall revenue

Protests...an anti-Glazer march ahead of the recent clash with Liverpool

grew by eight per cent to £4.9bn. As Deloitte noted: "The Premier League today is further ahead of the competition than ever before."

The magnetic effect is evidenced by the preponderance of foreign owners and the eagerness with which United States sports franchise bosses have sought to expand their empires and diversify. John W Henry's Fenway Sports Group, which owns Liverpool, is one example. Successful in all directions. Stan Kroenke has also been enriched by ownership of Arsenal but in personal terms rather than trophies.

Both examples doubtless encouraged Todd Boehly to put together his own consortium to buy Chelsea from Roman Abramovich. His Chelsea purchase price of £2.5bn set a useful benchmark, which was then widely quoted in speculation about potential interest from Ratcliffe in United.

Ratcliffe, at 69, might be considered a little old to throw himself into the maelstrom of Premier League ownership though his interest in sport and financial strength are clear. The chair and CEO of the INEOS chemicals group, which he founded in 1998, has been listed by Bloomberg at $28.2bn. That would be worth a place among the 60 richest individuals in the world.

Ratcliffe has invested heavily in sport in general with the INEOS cycling team, an America's Cup bid plus sponsorship of the Mercedes Formula 1 motor-racing team and New Zealand Rugby. As for football in particular, he bought Lausanne-Sport in 2017 and Nice in 2019.

Football history is littered with rich men who swept in to clubs promising financial transformation either because they were boyhood fans or saw a major business, political and/or image-building opportunity. The vast majority have also long since fallen by the wayside, a little wiser and a great deal poorer.

Entrepreneur...Jim Ratcliffe

Few have got it right.

Think of Silvio Berlusconi who defied the advice of his father when he bought a Milan on the brink of bankruptcy in 1986. Berlusconi had a grand interconnecting project linking sport, but mainly football, with his media business empire and political ambitions. Milan, during his reign, won 28 national and international trophies and he rose to prime minister of four Italian governments. Job done.

> The Glazers draw down £20m each year from their leveraged buyout of United. They also have skins as thick as their wallets...Why should they sell up?

Think also of Abramovich who erupted out of the post-Soviet chaos to leverage his oligarch-secured riches safely beyond Russia with enough loose change to indulge his passion for football. His 19-year reign at Stamford Bridge enriched Chelsea with equally as much silverware at home and abroad.

But the likes of Berlusconi and Abramovich have been few and far between. Far more solid as investors are the US franchise bosses with their fingers – and profits and losses – in so many sporting pies. At least their intentions are clear. Far more sinister are the nation states indulging in sportswashing, whether Abu Dhabi at Manchester City, Saudi Arabia at Newcastle United or Qatar at Paris Saint-Germain.

The sportswashing journey is still in comparatively early stages but, while football remains the dominant sporting power around the world (excluding the US), it is certain that more will follow suit – and in the Premier League.

The cruel truth is that football at elite level has always lived beyond its means. Hence UEFA's creation of Financial Fair Play (FFP), which was killed by the COVID-19 pandemic and is currently being re-engineered. Clubs have always chased the next goose with its golden eggs: pitchside advertising, shirt ads, kit sponsorship, TV deals, stadium naming rights, even the miasma of cryptocurrency and non-fungible tokens.

Barcelona have gambled on another route to riches by selling future media rights.

Not that football clubs are alone in eyeing up that route. FIFA reportedly dabbled with the concept of selling off a chunk of media-rights crown jewels when president Gianni Infantino was looking for cash to lure Europe's giants into competing in his dream of an expanded 24-team Club World Cup.

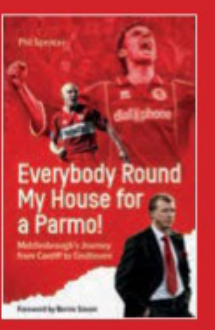
The rescheduling of competitions enforced by the pandemic put the Club World Cup on ice. Infantino can hardly complain about the clubs carrying on – where he left off – with their own Super League.

The French league is another admirer of the concept. Ligue 1 has signed off on a €1.5bn deal for a 13 per cent stake in its media rights with the private equity fund CVC Capital.

Good news for Nice and Co – which brings us back to Ratcliffe and his own track record in football.

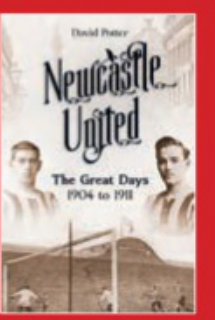
Nice have won nothing since the French Cup in 1997 (although they came close, getting to the final last season). Come to that, Lausanne haven't won any major silverware either since lifting the Swiss Cup in 1999 – and were relegated last season. United fans should be careful what they wish for.

BOOKS THIS MONTH



EVERYBODY ROUND MY HOUSE FOR A PARMO!
By Phil Spencer (Pitch Publishing, £16.99)

This is the story of the most successful era in Middlesbrough's history. From Marinelli to Mendieta and Vidmar to Viduka, this 'small town in Europe' went from relegation fodder to cup winners on the cusp of European glory in the space of just three seasons from 2003 to 2006. It is one of modern football's greatest fairy tales, but even the greatest successes come with their fair share of struggles.



NEWCASTLE UNITED THE GREAT DAYS
By David Potter (Pitch Publishing, £16.99)

Newcastle United have a football-mad city all to themselves and fans as passionate as you will find anywhere. Yet their recent record is mediocre at best and poor at worst, with every fan painfully aware that 1955 was the last time they won a major English trophy. But it wasn't always like that. In the Magpies' glory days of well over 100 years ago, they were considered the best team in the world.

Jonathan WILSON

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

The ever-enduring Louis van Gaal

Arrigo Sacchi won his first major title, the league with Milan, in 1987–88 and led Italy to the World Cup final in 1994; his career at the very top lasted seven years. Brian Clough won his first major title, the league with Derby County, in 1971–72 and his last, the European Cup with Nottingham Forest, in 1980. Bill Shankly won his first major title, the league with Liverpool, in 1963–64 and his last, the FA Cup with Liverpool, in 1974. Vicente del Bosque won his first major title, the Champions League with Real Madrid, in 1999–2000 and his last, the Euros with Spain, in 2012.

Even the very best managers rarely have much more than a decade at the very top. A study in *The Independent* in 2020 calculated the span of the elite manager at the top of the game at 12.3 years. There is, of course, a lot of room for interpretation here: Arsene Wenger, for instance, won his last FA Cup in 2017, giving him a span of 29 years after winning the league with Monaco in 1987–88, but by then he had probably been in decline for almost a decade. The point perhaps is less the precise figure than the acceptance that there is a peak and it is not that long.

"Bluntly domineering"... Van Gaal is now in his third stint as Netherlands boss

> This winter, despite having undergone treatment for prostate cancer over the past year, Louis van Gaal will lead the Netherlands at the World Cup. He is 71 now and remains as bluntly domineering as ever

Football management is hard. Renewing teams is hard. Selling players who have aged after years of stellar service is hard. Accepting that the approach that brought success needs updating is hard. Finding effective ways of modifying that previously successful approach is hard. Maintaining focus and drive, being prepared to take risks, avoiding the lapse into stereotype (asking not what is the best solution to this problem, but what would be the most characteristic solution) is hard. And that's before you get to the external factors: changing owners, health, family, club finances, geopolitical events...

Which makes those managers who can sustain success for protracted periods – Alex Ferguson, Valeriy Lobanovskyi, Jupp Heynckes – all the more remarkable. Louis van Gaal won the league with Ajax in 1993–94; this winter, despite having undergone treatment for prostate cancer over the past year, he will lead the Netherlands at the World Cup. He is 71 now and remains as bluntly domineering as ever. What has changed, though, is the world around him: in a footballing landscape of spoofers and bluffers, of spivs and chancers, of hedge funds and public investment funds, he stands now as a beacon of integrity. Whatever his faults, however dismissive and unreasonable he can be, nobody can seriously doubt that Van Gaal is, first and foremost, interested in winning football matches.

Of course he has a very clearly defined idea of how to go about doing that, one that has led to major ructions with players, managers, journalists and fans over the past

Ever-enduring...Van Gaal ahead of the 1996 Champions League final

three decades. That, after all, is the Dutch way. Van Gaal's interpretation of Total Football is a cautious one. Unlike Johan Cruyff, he has never liked to see his players taking on opponents with the ball unless there is clear space behind them. The interchange of positions that was characteristic of the first iteration of the style makes him uneasy. What he wants, beyond all else, is control (which is why Pep Guardiola, one of those players with whom he had a strained relationship, cites him as a major influence).

Perhaps by the time he was at Manchester United, where his football was widely derided as boring and risk-averse, Van Gaal was past his peak as a club manager. But equally, he inherited a hodgepodge of a squad and was given less money to put that right than either his predecessor or his successor. Compared to the last year at Old Trafford, the Van Gaal reign looks a haven.

But international football, anyway, is different. Pressing models are, of necessity, far less sophisticated; managers have less time to drill their squads. The football, as a result, tends to be more cautious. Van Gaal led the Netherlands to third at the 2014 World Cup and he turned around a qualifying campaign that had been going awry.

In 2014, he surprisingly adopted a back three, and has retained that shape recently. It was said at the time he had been inspired by Ronald Koeman's Feyenoord but, characteristically, he rejected that, saying he needed extra cover as he couldn't trust his defenders in one-on-one situations and insisting a back three had been implicit in how his Barcelona played.

What is significant, though, is less who came up with the idea, than that Van Gaal, even after so much experience in the game, was able to come up with a solution to the problem he had identified. And that flexibility of thought is what defines those managers whose careers at the very top stretch into a second or third decade.

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

Chaos kicks off ...Bonucci scores after his penalty was saved

1 CHAOTIC CLIMAX

Where do we begin in attempting to summarise the final minutes of Juventus' recent Serie A clash with Salernitana? The chaos began in the 93rd minute when Leonardo Bonucci converted a rebound after his penalty was saved to make it 2-2. Two minutes later, Juve had the ball in the back of the net again but, having already been booked, goalscorer Arkadiusz Milik was sent off for taking his shirt off in the celebrations. To make matters worse, VAR then overturned the goal for offside – despite footage, which emerged later, appearing to show the Salernitana midfielder Antonio Candreva near the corner flag playing everyone onside. As scuffles broke out among the players, Juan Cuadrado was sent off for Juve and Federico Fazio for the visitors. "Unfortunately, referees didn't spot the error, but neither VAR nor referees made a mistake," said Italian Football Federation president Gabriele Gravina. "It's not a scandal. Everyone should calm down."

2 TRANSFER STORY #1

In one of the more bizarre transfers of the year, Raul De Tomas agreed to join former club Rayo Vallecano from Espanyol – almost two weeks after the transfer window closed – meaning he will not be able to play for Rayo until January. Negotiations for the player appeared to have ground to a halt, with Rayo president Raul Martin Pesa claiming to have been headbutted by one of the player's agents. Yet less than a fortnight later, Rayo announced the capture of De Tomas until the end of the 2026-27 season. A loan move to the Middle East has been touted as a stopgap while he waits, although with Qatar 2022 kicking off in November his World Cup hopes are almost certainly over.

3 TRANSFER STORY #2

While De Tomas provided one of the most bizarre stories of the transfer window, Jay Stansfield was involved in the most touching. By joining Exeter, on loan from Fulham, he followed in the footsteps of his father Adam, who died in 2010 while playing for the Devon club. The Grecians subsequently retired his No.9 shirt, but now his son will become the first player to wear it since then. "To be able to wear it and run in front of that stand means so much to me and it's something I'll remember forever," said Stansfield, who joined Fulham aged 16 after coming through Exeter's academy.

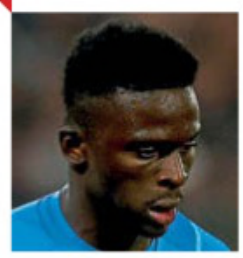
4 EXCLUDED

Norway reiterated their firm stance against Russia by axing Mathias Normann from their UEFA Nations League squad following the midfielder's decision to join Russian side Dynamo Moscow on loan from Norwich City. The country has already denied Russian skiers from taking part in races on Norwegian soil, and in a statement the Norwegian Football Federation president Lise Klaveness said: "All of Norwegian and European football agree to put joint pressure on Russia as a belligerent party, which has also used positions of power in sport very actively."

5 LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

By coming off the bench in Liverpool's 9-0 victory over Bournemouth in August, 17-year-old Bobby Clark became the eighth-youngest Premier League player in the Reds' history. He also followed in the footsteps of his father Lee, who played in the top flight for Fulham and Newcastle United. Incredibly, as Mark Carruthers pointed out on Twitter, Bobby was joined on the subs' bench by James Milner – almost exactly 17 years after his dad had also come off the bench alongside Milner, in a game for Newcastle, when Bobby himself was still just a baby.

Longevity... James Milner and Bobby Clark



"Part of the madness of deadline day. We have been screwed up. It happens even to the best ones"

Leeds United owner Andrea Radrizzani after Marseille's Bamba Dieng rejected them at the last minute of deadline day in order to sign for Nice, only to then fail a medical

IN PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

SUMMER 2022 LATE TRANSFERS

Dream debut ...Antony

Made permanent ...Cristian Romero

Returning loanee ...Ilaix Moriba

Wonderkid... Brandon Soppy

Back in London ...Willian

£85.5m Antony
Ajax to Man. United

£72.36m Wesley Fofana
Leicester City to Chelsea

£63m Alexander Isak
Real Sociedad to Newcastle

£45m Cristian Romero
Atalanta to Tottenham

£38.66m Lucas Paqueta
Lyon to West Ham United

£20.7m Fabian Ruiz
Napoli to PSG

£18.1m Umar Sadiq
Almeria to Real Sociedad

£16m Hassane Kamara
Watford to Udinese

£15.5m Carlos Soler
Valencia to PSG

£15.4m Sasa Kalajdzic
Stuttgart to Wolves

£15.4m Sofiane Diop
Monaco to Nice

£15.1m Manuel Akanji
B. Dortmund to Man. City

£15m Wout Faes
Reims to Leicester City

£15m Neal Maupay
Brighton to Everton

£14.4m Rasmus Hojlund
Sturm Graz to Atalanta

£13m Leander Dendoncker
Wolves to Aston Villa

£13m Emerson
Chelsea to West Ham United

£12.9m Amine Gouiri
Nice to Rennes

£12m Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang
Barcelona to Chelsea

£9.9m Jorgen Strand Larsen
Groningen to Celta Vigo

£9.6m Armand Lauriente
Lorient to Sassuolo

£9m Billy Gilmour
Chelsea to Brighton

£9m James Garner
Man. United to Everton

£8.6m Christopher Wooh
Lens to Rennes

£8.6m Duje Caleta-Car
Marseille to Southampton

£8.6m El Bilal Toure
Reims to Almeria

£8m Samuel Edozie
Man. City to Southampton

£7.6m Brandon Soppy
Udinese to Atalanta

£7.3m Joshua Zirkzee
Bayern Munich to Bologna

£6.9m Nathan Ngoumou
Toulouse to B. M'Gladbach

£6.3m Andre Almeida
Vitoria Guimaraes to Valencia

£6m Lazaro
Flamengo to Almeria

£6m Juan Larios
Man. City to Southampton

£5.1m Felix Afena-Gyan
Roma to Cremonese

£5m Malick Thiaw
Schalke to Milan

£4.7m Johan Mojica
Elche to Villarreal

£4.7m Willy Boly
Wolves to Nott'm Forest

£4.5m Carlos Vinicius
Benfica to Fulham

£4m Josh Bowler
Blackpool to Nott'm Forest

£4m Ignatius Ganago
Lens to Nantes

£3.9m Wilfried Gnonto
Zurich to Leeds United

£3.9m Flavius Daniliuc
Nice to Salernitana

£3.9m Patrick Berg
Lens to Bodo/Glimt

£3.4m Hwang Ui-jo
Bordeaux to Nott'm Forest

£3.4m Matias Vargas
Espanyol to Shanghai Port

£3.4m Juan Cabal
Atletico Nacional to Verona

£2.7m Isak Hien
Djurgardens to Verona

£2.6m Michy Batshuayi
Chelsea to Fenerbahce

£2.6m Veljko Birmancevic
Malmo to Toulouse

£2.6m Adam Ounas
Napoli to Lille

£2.6m Maxi Gomez
Valencia to Trabzonspor

£2.6m Amadou Diawara
Roma to Anderlecht

£2m Idrissa Gana Gueye
PSG to Everton

£2m Anwar El Ghazi
Aston Villa to PSV

£2m Tommaso Mancini
Vicenza to Juventus

£1.7m Umut Bozok
Lorient to Trabzonspor

£1.7m Pep Chavarria
Real Zaragoza to Rayo Vallecano

£1.7m Brian Ocampo
Nacional to Cadiz

£1.7m Dedryck Boyata
Hertha Berlin to Club Brugge

£1.3m Riccardo Calafiori
Roma to Basel

£1m Mariusz Stepinski
Verona to Aris Limassol

£1m Felipe Vizeu
Udinese to Sheriff Tiraspol

£1m Kingsley Ehizibue
Cologne to Udinese

£850k Agustin Rogel
Estudiantes to Hertha Berlin

£850k Thomas Monconduit
Lorient to Saint-Etienne

£850k Christopher Jullien
Celtic to Montpellier

£450k Ajdin Hrustic
Eintracht Frankfurt to Verona

LOANS

Yusuf Yazici Lille to Trabzonspor
Denis Zakaria Juventus to Chelsea
Jordi Escobar Almeria to Real Betis
Loic Bade Rennes to Nott'm Forest
Daniel James Leeds United to Fulham
Boubacar Traore Metz to Wolves
Lucien Agoume Inter to Troyes
Amine Harit Schalke to Marseille
Uros Racic Valencia to Braga
Jan Bednarek Southampton to Aston Villa
Andre Gomes Everton to Lille
Jack Hendry Club Brugge to Cremonese
Mads Sorensen Brentford to Nice
Arthur Juventus to Liverpool
Justin Kluivert Roma to Valencia
Ainsley Maitland-Niles Arsenal to Southampton
Ez Abde Barcelona to Osasuna
Mateusz Lis Southampton to Troyes
Ilaix Moriba RB Leipzig to Valencia
Sergino Dest Barcelona to Milan
Paulo Gazzaniga Fulham to Girona
Ignacio Pussetto Watford to Sampdoria
Francesco Acerbi Lazio to Inter
Jordan Amavi Marseille to Getafe
Ethan Ampadu Chelsea to Spezia
Julian Draxler PSG to Benfica
Martin Dubravka Newcastle to Man. United
Abdou Diallo PSG to RB Leizpig
Layvin Kurzawa PSG to Fulham
Aster Vranckx Wolfsburg to Milan
Julian Weigl Benfica to B. M'Gladbach
Kasper Dolberg Nice to Sevilla
Jack Stephens Southampton to Bournemouth
Krzysztof Piatek Hertha Berlin to Salernitana
Lucas Ocampos Sevilla to Ajax
Amad Diallo Man. United to Sunderland

"I am devastated that my time at Chelsea has come to an end. This is a club where I felt at home, both professionally and personally ...I am honoured to have been part of this club's history"

Thomas Tuchel's statement on his sacking by Chelsea

Leandro Paredes PSG to Juventus
Sergio Reguilon Tottenham to Atletico Madrid
Callum Hudson-Odoi Chelsea to Bayer Leverkusen
Harry Winks Tottenham to Sampdoria
Alexander Sorloth RB Leizpig to Real Sociedad
Renan Lodi Atletico Madrid to Nott'm Forest
Ander Herrera PSG to Athletic Bilbao
Jean-Philippe Gbamin Everton to Trabzonspor
Antonio Barak Verona to Fiorentina
Arkadiusz Milik Marseille to Juventus
Nicolas Pepe Arsenal to Nice
Dele Alli Everton to Besiktas
Samuel Umtiti Barcelona to Lecce
Eric Bailly Man. United to Marseille
Kevin Strootman Marseille to Genoa
Rony Lopes Sevilla to Troyes
Bertrand Traore Aston Villa to Istanbul Basaksehir
Giacomo Raspadori Sassuolo to Napoli
Calvin Stengs Nice to Antwerp

FREE TRANSFERS

Aaron Ramsey Juventus to Nice
Marcos Alonso Chelsea to Barcelona
Marcelo Real Madrid to Olympiakos
Ross Barkley Chelsea to Nice
Adil Aouchiche Saint-Etienne to Lorient
Manu Vallejo Valencia to Girona
Hector Bellerin Arsenal to Barcelona
Toni Villa Real Valladolid to Girona
Federico Fernandez Newcastle to Elche
Yann Karamoh Parma to Torino
John Brooks Wolfsburg to Benfica
Willian Corinthians to Fulham
Ibrahim Amadou Metz to Angers
Florian Grillitsch Hoffenheim to Ajax
Martin Braithwaite Barcelona to Espanyol
Vito Mannone Monaco to Lorient
Munir El Haddadi Sevilla to Getafe
Adnan Januzaj Real Sociedad to Sevilla
Edinson Cavani Man. United to Valencia
Andrea Belotti Torino to Roma
Islam Slimani Sporting to Brest
Diego Costa Atletico Mineiro to Wolves
Loris Karius Liverpool to Newcastle

EUROPE

Brighton goodbyes... new Chelsea boss Potter

GRAHAM POTTER replaced Thomas Tuchel as Chelsea manager after three years at Brighton & Hove Albion.

Motherwell appointed **STEVEN HAMMELL** as the Fir Park club's new manager on a two-year deal.

The Turkish transfer window closing later than the rest of Europe saw some big-name last-minute signings, including Galatasaray signing **JUAN MATA** on a free from Manchester United and **MAURO ICARDI** on loan from PSG, and Besiktas signing **NATHAN REDMOND** from Southampton for an undisclosed fee.

Maurizio Sarri's former assistant **FRANCESCO CALZONA** took charge of the Slovakia national team – his first senior management role.

AFRICA

Egyptian Premier League side National Bank of Egypt bolstered their goalkeeping department with the arrival of **MOHAMED ABOU-GABAL** aka **"GABASKI"**.

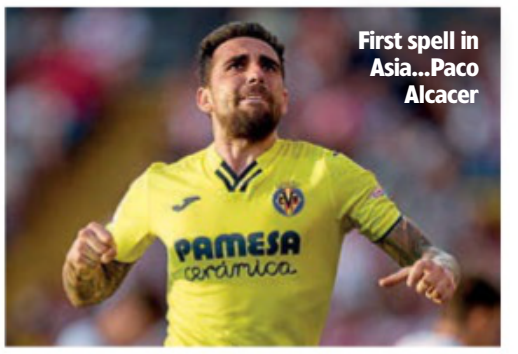
Morocco hired **WALID REGRAGUI** as their new national team coach following the sacking of Vahid Halilhodzic.

ASIA

CARLOS QUEIROZ replaced Dragan Skocic as Iran's national team coach ahead of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

The 19-times capped Spain striker **PACO ALCACER** joined Sharjah FC in the UAE Pro League after his contract was cancelled by Villarreal, while the United Arab Emirates outfit also announced the signing of Bosnian midfielder **MIRALEM PJANIC** from Barcelona on a free transfer.

Return...Carlos Queiroz previously managed Iran from 2011 to 2019



First spell in Asia...Paco Alcacer

CONCACAF

LAFC snapped up former Barcelona and Real Betis forward **CRISTIAN TELLO** on a free transfer.

San Jose Earthquakes signed Peruvian international left-back **MIGUEL TRAUCO** from Saint-Etienne.

LA Galaxy captured Uruguay defender **MARTIN CACERES** through to the end of the 2022 MLS season.

Appointments, sackings and loans

OUT

Farewell...Scott Parker

EUROPE

Bournemouth sacked manager **SCOTT PARKER** after his side's 9-0 defeat by Liverpool, just four games into the season.

JACK ROSS was fired as Dundee United head coach after just seven games in charge at Tannadice.

JOSIP ILICIC terminated his contract with Atalanta by mutual consent after five years at the club and having struggled with injuries and mental health issues recently. Elsewhere, a number of other players were released by their clubs, including **ADEL TAARABT** (Benfica), **DANNY ROSE** (Watford) and former Italy striker **SIMONE ZAZA** (Torino).

"Ultimately I hope the Premier League takes a little bit of a lesson from American sports…why isn't there an All-Star game? We could do a North versus South All-Star game for the Premier League"

Chelsea's new owner Todd Boehly

Marcus EDWARDS

(Sporting)

"His body and the way that he plays – remind a little bit from the beginning of Messi," said Mauricio Pochettino of a young Edwards as he emerged from Tottenham's academy. It is a description that has followed the Englishman ever since, raising the expectations of him at Spurs to unattainable levels.

Despite the fact that his style is reminiscent of the Argentine genius – diminutive, left-footed, low centre of gravity and close ball control – it was an unhelpful comparison, as Edwards struggled to make an impression on English football.

Fast-forward a few years and, in September, he became the fifth Englishman to score a Champions League goal for a non-British club in the last four years. A poster boy for spreading your wings and taking on challenges abroad, he could yet be a dark horse for Qatar.

QR CORNER

Sanfrecce Hiroshima midfielder Takumu Kawamura scores a contender for the 2022 Puskas Award.

Use a tablet or smartphone to scan the QR code

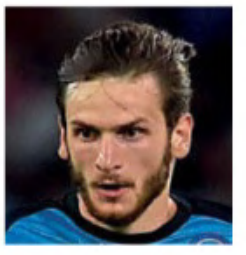
Christopher ATHERTON
(Glenavon)
At the age of 13 years and 329 days, the Northern Irish schoolboy became the youngest player ever to appear in a senior competitive football match in the UK, breaking a 42-year-old record.

Mykhaylo MUDRYK
(Shakhtar Donetsk)
Arsenal have been linked with a move for the tricky 21-year-old winger after he scored one goal and assisted two more in Shakhtar's 4-1 Champions League win over RB Leipzig.

Regis LE BRIS
(Lorient)
After narrowly avoiding relegation last season, Lorient have been flying high in Ligue 1 since appointing Le Bris, ending September in the top five.

Samuel EDOZIE
(Southampton)
The fourth player to move from Manchester City to the south coast this summer, the England youth winger was originally snapped up by City from Millwall aged 16 in July 2019.

Folarin BALOGUN
(Reims)
Ligue 1's Young Player of the Month for August, Balogun has thrived in France since leaving Arsenal on loan in the summer, scoring five goals in his first seven matches for the Red and Whites.



Khvicha KVARATSKHELIA
(Napoli)
A key part to Napoli's promising start to the season, the Georgian has already been nicknamed "Kvaradona" by Napoli fans, in tribute to Diego Maradona.

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Barcelona

How Barca president Joan Laporta helped guide the Catalan giants through a hectic summer

At the end of the 2021-22 campaign, Barcelona president Joan Laporta claimed the club had been "clinically dead" when he was elected in March 2021. Ahead of the summer transfer window opening, he warned that they "remained in the ICU".

Two months later, Laporta proudly proclaimed Barca were "out of the hospital" as he unveiled new signing Robert Lewandowski – who, despite celebrating his 34th birthday in August, remains one of football's genuine superstars. The Poland international was among seven summer arrivals at the Camp Nou, carrying on from a busy January transfer window that saw eye-catching deals for Ferran Torres and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang (the latter subsequently joined Chelsea, while the former has already been linked with a return to the Premier League).

The Catalan club's debt last season stood at a reported €1.35 billion, with the strict salary spending imposed by La Liga limited at an alarming minus €144 million (the only negative figure in Spanish football). They had been forced into losing Lionel Messi, their icon, as they could not afford to extend his contract. Players regularly deferred wage payments and bonuses while in some cases they accepted significant pay reductions to assist the club.

So how did the club not only manage to rise from the dead and begin recovering in the emergency ward, but to embark on signing multiple stars? How did their league-imposed spending cap rise over €800m in the space of a year?

Laporta's board devised a series of what they described as "*palancas*", or "economic levers". Across two separate packages, they sold off 25 per cent of their La Liga TV money over the next 25 years to global investment firm Sixth Street. They also sold off 49 per cent of Barca Studios – the club's "content arm" – in separate transactions, firstly to fan token platform Socios.com and then to Orpheus Media, led by Jaume Roures.

The sale of the *palancas* totalled over €700m and followed a four-year sponsorship deal with Spotify, which alongside shirt sponsorship ensured that the audio streaming platform became the first brand to sponsor the club's stadium. Player sales and wage reductions, both permanent and deferred, also helped raise immediate funds.

So, that is *how* Barcelona did it – but *why* did they do it?

After all, the club were effectively mortgaging their future by signing up to long-term income sacrifices for short-term gain. They already had an exciting young team, based around stupendously talented teenagers Pedri, Gavi and Ansu Fati. Not a vintage Barca side by any means, but surely good enough to expect Champions League knockout football and a title challenge.

In short, the club's hierarchy believe that it is better to speculate to accumulate; that immediate spending will bring trophies and strengthen their revenue; they projected that star signings will increase ticket sales (Barcelona's 99,000-capacity Camp Nou home was often half-empty last season), while making a statement that the club is back among the elite.

There were also more political reasons at play. Barca's ownership model ensures that their presidents are elected and accountable to the club's members. Indeed, the board were required to secure key votes from members in order to sell off assets. Presidents are under immense pressure to appease fans, or risk being removed.

> How did the club not only manage to rise from the dead and begin recovering in the emergency ward, but to embark on signing multiple stars?

Laporta – a former politician in the Catalan parliament – is aware that populism is central to his ambitions. It is universally acknowledged that he inherited a dreadful situation from his predecessor Josep Maria Bartomeu, whose board resigned en masse in October 2020, having led the club to financial breaking point.

Star signing...Robert Lewandowski at his official unveiling

Like Laporta, Bartomeu had felt the urgency to win at any cost and was pushed into taking risks with the club's future. As Bartomeu's resignation showed, he would not stick around to deal with the fallout, and got out in time to ensure Messi's agonising exit did not happen on his watch.

Like Bartomeu, Laporta knew that overseeing a period of restricted spending would extinguish hopes of glory not just for the club, but also for himself. The democratic system encourages short-term priorities over sustainability.

The same presidential system is in place at eternal rivals Real Madrid, whom Barca are preparing to face for the first time this season. Yet for *Los Blancos*, it is a system that has produced much better results recently. Florentino Perez has totalled 19 years at the helm over two spells, overseeing 30 trophies including six Champions League titles. The club's relative recent serenity has been built on presidential stability, cohesiveness and long-term planning. Bona fide club legends Cristiano Ronaldo, Sergio Ramos, Raphael Varane, Casemiro and Marcelo have all been eased out or allowed to depart as Eduardo

Camavinga, Vinicius Junior, Rodrygo Goes and Aurelien Tchouameni seamlessly grow into stars.

Perez's first period at the helm, from 2000 to 2006, was defined by the big-spending *Galactico* approach, while Laporta's first spell as Barca president (2003 to 2010), saw the club's *La Masia* academy lay the groundwork for success. Now, their positions have been somewhat flipped, with Laporta attempting to buy success and Perez operating with patience and prudence.

The two *Clasico* rivals remain unfamiliarly united in their pursuit of a European Super League. Indeed, that may play into Barca's willingness to forfeit a future of domestic league TV rights, with the prospect of long-term fortified financial stability that the ESL would provide just around the corner.

Yet on the pitch, Barcelona and Real Madrid remain best of enemies. And on the pitch is the only measure that Laporta will be judged. Any concern over long-term planning will be set aside for the remainder of his tenure if he can wrestle domestic supremacy back from the Spanish capital. That is the fire that fuels him after guiding the club away from medical attention.

Colin Millar

Charles De Ketelaere

Belgium's wonderkid and next big hope ready to enhance his reputation at Milan

Can Charles De Ketelaere become the new face of Belgium's next generation? With the era of Kevin De Bruyne, Eden Hazard et al. soon coming to an end, that is the challenge for the new Milan signing, alongside Everton's Amadou Onana, Southampton's Romeo Lavia and Nottingham Forest's Orel Mangala.

Since the Belgian football revolution in the early 2000s, the Premier League has become a regular destination for some of the country's best players. Hazard dazzled at Chelsea, Vincent Kompany captained Manchester City before De Bruyne became the club's midfield metronome. They have all added to the rich history and tapestry of the English top flight.

Linked with Leeds United, De Ketelaere has taken a different direction. He moved to Italian champions Milan from Club Brugge for €35 million. It was the most expensive outgoing transfer in the history of Belgian club football, beating the previous record of Jonathan David's €32m move to Lille. The transfer saga was covered in great detail by the Belgian newspapers as well as Italy's intrusive 24/7 sports press. His every move was tracked, his every word scrutinised.

It speaks of the expectations of the 21-year-old. He rarely featured for Belgium's international youth teams because of his rather frail frame, but at Club Brugge De Ketelaere quickly established himself, becoming indispensable in midfield and across the front line after he debuted in the Belgian Cup against lowly Francs Borains at the age of 18. Less than a month later he was starting against Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League – a star was born.

He went on to win three league titles with Club Brugge, but it was his playing style that impressed the most. The ultimate exponent of Brugge's renewed focus on youth development, he is elegant on the ball and his distribution is perfect. In attack, he has the attributes of a true striker, not unlike Marco van Basten: he understands how to move off the ball, how to pivot and how to strike. That versatility is a real asset.

> He went on to win three league titles with Club Brugge, but it was his playing style that impressed the most

"I am technically skilled and my first touch is good," said De Ketelaere at his official presentation in Milan. "I also score and provide assists. I am dynamic and like to move into space. At Club [Brugge], I have had many positions. I now prefer a role around a striker – to play off, but also to drop off."

At Milan, De Ketelaere will play the "*Trequartista*" role, playing between the lines of midfield and attack, following in the footsteps of Kaka and Ronaldinho.

The days of such star power in red and black at the San Siro are largely over, with the possible exception of the ageing Zlatan Ibrahimovic. With budgetary constraints, the club are keen for coach Stefano Pioli to develop young talent. De Ketelaere is the perfect fit. Mature, he can still progress.

De Bruyne needed detours in Bremen and Wolfsburg before his Premier League ascent. Hazard was in part a Lille youth product before his Chelsea stardom. Can De Ketelaere establish himself in his first Serie A season without any hiccups? Doing so could well prove that he truly is a generational talent.

Samindra Kunti

Debutant... De Ketelaere applauds the fans after his Serie A debut v Udinese

Iran

Preparations for Qatar have been thrown into disarray following the re-hiring of Carlos Queiroz as coach to replace Dragan Skocic

In January Team Melli were the first nation from Asia to qualify for the 2022 World Cup. The draw that was made back in April could barely have been more dramatic with a group containing England and the United States. It has been suggested that the prospect of facing these two countries that have loomed so large in Iran's modern history and current international situation has contributed to the summer of chaos in Tehran, one that ended with former national team coach Carlos Queiroz returning for a second spell in charge.

The United States and England, as well as Wales who qualified later, all have homegrown coaches in the form of Gregg Berhalter, Gareth Southgate and Rob Page respectively. All in Iran know that November's games will be politically charged and emotional and many felt that Iran should also be led by a local coach for symbolic reasons, or, failing that, a big-name foreign manager to give Team Melli the best chance of success of a first appearance in the second round of the World Cup at the sixth time of asking.

> November's games will be politically charged and emotional and many felt that Iran should be led by a local coach for symbolic reasons, or, failing that, a big-name foreign manager

Dragan Skocic was obviously not local and not a big name. The Croatian was appointed in 2020 after working in the Persian Gulf Pro League, succeeding Marc Wilmots who had left in December 2019 after seven months and indifferent results. Under Skocic, Iran never looked like not qualifying but had been placed in the weaker of the two final groups in Asian qualifying and did not really impress. Defeating Syria, Lebanon, United Arab Emirates and Iraq was expected but just one point from two games against their main group rivals, South Korea, led to concerns about how Iran, with a talented bunch of players, fared when tests were tougher.

Politics is never far from the pitch in a country where clubs are owned, either directly or indirectly, by the state. After Iran's volleyball team had success on the international stage in July, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei took to social media with a post titled: "Happy success with an Iranian coach", in which he seemed to indicate that he preferred the nation's sport teams to be led by locals. Whether he did or not, the next day, July 11, Skocic was fired.

Reaction was divided as, reportedly, were the players. Rumours suggested that some of them wanted Queiroz, coach from 2011 to 2019, to return. The former Real Madrid manager, who left his post with Egypt earlier this year, had a tempestuous relationship with the Iran FA during his time but did deliver two World Cups. There were locals mentioned too. Ali Daei, the country's all-time top goalscorer – who subsequently ruled himself out – along with Javad Nekounam, the nation's most-capped player, were also reportedly in the mix.

Then just six days after the original decision, Skocic was reinstated. There were reports that with the federation in limbo – there was a temporary president at the time – there weren't enough officials around to provide the required number of signatures

Popular...Carlos Queiroz led Iran to two consecutive World Cups in 2014 and 2018

Turbulent...Skocic was sacked as Iran coach and reinstated just a week later before being shown the exit door again

to make the dismissal official. Regardless, it was not a good look.

"I'm not one to be carried away by pride and expect a red carpet after doing a good job, but I expect respect, because it is clear that I deserve this job," Skocic said in August. "There are those who, due to various interests, try to make everything I have done worthless, and the common denominator of all of them is resistance to reality. They tried to create tension so that the national team would face problems. All of them should not ignore the fact that this was the fastest Asian team to qualify for the World Cup with the most wins and points."

On August 30, Mehdi Taj was elected to take charge of the football federation. President from 2016 to 2019, Taj said just before the election that he would seriously consider bringing Queiroz back if he was elected, and it was announced on social media on September 8 that the former Real Madrid boss was coming back. The man who had failed to take Colombia and then Egypt to the 2022 World Cup will instead go to Qatar with Iran. The contract is reportedly four months long but there is an option to extend it to the 2023 Asian Cup if all goes well.

Iran have never progressed past the group stage of a World Cup finals before but there is hope that it will be sixth time lucky in their third tournament with Carlos Queiroz in his second spell in charge.

John Duerden

Dwight Yorke

Former Trinidad & Tobago striker embarks on his managerial career in Australia

Dwight Yorke scored 123 Premier League goals, starred in Manchester United's historic treble in 1999 and won the domestic Golden Boot the same season. Yet despite his impressive CV in English football, Yorke has travelled halfway around the world to land his first managerial role, taking the reins of Australian side Macarthur FC ahead of the new A-League season.

Many retired players have walked into high-level management careers off the back of far less glittering on-field achievements, but Yorke feels such opportunities are not being afforded to aspiring black and minority managers like himself.

"It hasn't just happened overnight," Yorke tells *World Soccer* of the difficulties prospective black managers encounter in the game. "Something has been going on. We talk about inequality and that's what it is. The picture paints itself.

"Without mentioning other people who have gotten into management, the path always seems to be different. You always have to go the hard way around to get in. There's not the same path as others.

"In my time as a footballer, I feel like I had to do the rounds before I got the recognition I deserved. But that's different because you can control your destiny; you're out there expressing yourself. As an aspiring manager, you've got to wait for someone to give you that opportunity. The challenge is much more difficult."

The former striker holds a UEFA pro coaching licence, yet feels his experience of being denied coaching opportunities in the past is typical for many black and minority candidates.

"They say: 'You didn't get your coaching badges.' So I go and get my coaching badges," Yorke explains. "Then they say: 'You don't have any experience.' But where are you going to get experience? It's one thing after another while others are getting chances with less experience and less qualifications. What do you do?

"But it motivates me more. If you have anything about you, the more people tell you that you can't do something, you try to prove them wrong."

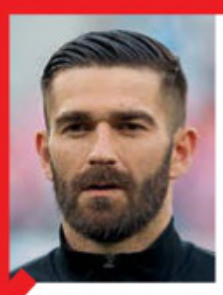
Yorke spent a season with Sydney FC towards the end of his playing career and has now returned to Australia to seek management opportunities. In May, he managed an A-League All-Stars side in a friendly against Barcelona, and in July took charge of Sydney-based Macarthur.

The Trinidad & Tobago icon returned to Manchester United's Carrington training ground to complete the necessary work for his pro licence and impressed staff and players alike with his coaching skill. Before taking on his new role with Macarthur, he sought advice from his former boss Sir Alex Ferguson, current United assistant coach Steve McClaren – whom he also worked under as a player – and his former Aston Villa team-mate Gareth Southgate.

"I feel like now is the time for me to get into management and I'm ready to do that."

Ryan Baldi

All-Stars... Yorke oversaw a 3-2 defeat to Barcelona in May



Marko Livaja

Former prodigy finally hitting his potential ahead of the World Cup

Marko Livaja's story is an incredible one. The forward was only 17 when he was snapped up by Internazionale, recruited from Hajduk Split's academy and whisked off to Italy, hyped as Croatia's next big talent. Now, 12 years and nine clubs (across five different countries) later, he is finally living up to the hype, and back at the club where it all started for him.

Livaja returned to Hajduk, his hometown club, in 2021. With 28 goals (the highest return since former Arsenal striker Eduardo's 34 for Dinamo Zagreb in 2006-07), he was the runaway star of last season's Croatian top flight – a stat made all the more remarkable considering he'd never even hit double figures in a league campaign before.

The early years of his career saw him marked as an *enfant terrible*, considered a hot-head, argumentative, always looking for a fight. His turning point seems to have come when marrying his wife Iris, a model and former Miss Croatia. He matured during a four-year spell in Greece with AEK Athens, joining (initially on loan from Las Palmas) in 2017-18. At the end of his first season he won his first Croatia cap at the age of 25 – relatively late considering his early promise.

International progress has been slow since then. Before September's UEFA Nations League action, Livaja had 13 caps in total – including none in 2019 and 2020 – and was yet to complete 90 minutes in a Croatia shirt.

Yet he did play in all of Croatia's final seven World Cup qualifiers, scoring twice, and appears to have developed into a key member of Zlatko Dalic's squad – if not quite the starting XI.

"The national team manager invited me while I was still playing for AEK," said Livaja, "so it came to my head that I must come back to Hajduk in order to prove myself in our domestic championship to compete more seriously for the national team."

In January 2021, Livaja turned down a contract extension with AEK to return to Hajduk, and has almost single-handedly revived the club from Split with his performances. Prior to his arrival, Hajduk's last trophy was the Croatian Cup in 2013, but in May they got their hands on the trophy again, beating Rijeka 3-1 in the final.

Hajduk have produced many of Croatia's finest players – including Slaven Bilic, Igor Stimac, Alen Boksic and others – but rarely have any of them achieved the level of popularity that Livaja is enjoying right now.

Hajduk's wait for a league title goes on, with the last one coming in 2005, but they pushed Dinamo Zagreb all the way last season, and will hope to go one better in 2022-23 despite a mixed start to the campaign.

Whether they are successful or not, Livaja remains an important figure for the league as a whole. The Croatian national team is usually dominated by players from foreign leagues – Luka Modric, Marcelo Brozovic, Ivan Perisic, et al. Yet in a boost to the league's hopes of retaining its best talents, Livaja's international chances have actually been improved by returning home. The same is true for Mislav Orsic, who has won the bulk of his caps since joining Dinamo Zagreb following a spell in South Korea with Ulsan Hyundai.

In total, Livaja played over 50 games for Croatia's youth teams. Yet his constant club changing, unstable form and unpredictable behaviour meant that he had to wait for a senior call-up.

International goal ...Livaja scores in a World Cup qualifier against Slovenia

"I really don't like to show off or flaunt and talk about myself, but to me, as well as to many other players, the greatest honour and desire is to appear for the national team at the World Cup," he says. "I'm a little bit afraid, more honestly scared, of a possible accidental injury to myself.

"We have a really great team – we proved it in the Nations League with away victories against Denmark and France. Those performances are proof of the quality of our national team, so we can rightly expect that in Qatar we will once again be the surprise of the finals, as we were at Russia 2018.

> "The greatest honour and desire is to appear for the national team at the World Cup"

"Our first task is to pass through the group stage. In the knockout competition we know we are able to beat any opponent."

Croatia have struggled to replace Mario Mandzukic since he retired at the end of the last World Cup. Livaja will compete with Hoffenheim's Andrej Kramaric, Ante Budimir of Osasuna and Dinamo Zagreb's Bruno Petkovic for selection in Qatar, but, if he carries on scoring goals at the same rate for Hajduk, he will be hard to ignore.

Zdravko Reic

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eyewitness

James Nalton reports

CANADA

A long time coming

Arctic weather gripped BMO Field in Toronto on the night the Canada men's national team qualified for their first World Cup since 1986. It felt almost apt that a nation known for its ice hockey prowess and as a home to winter sports confirmed itself as an association football force in such conditions.

It added to the feeling that, more than ever, this sport belongs in Canada and Canada belongs in this sport. The players and staff bounded onto the pitch following that night's 4-0 win against Jamaica, huddled around each other in groups across the field. The supporters that had been active all game, partly to spur their team on and partly to keep warm, roundly cheered the victors.

Those tight huddles and joyous celebrations lasted for some time and eventually morphed into one large party across the stadium, and indeed the entire country. Reaching this point had not been easy for Canada, whose vast, sprawling northern nation had spent years in the soccer wilderness.

Canada finished dead last at the 1986 World Cup in Mexico, failing to score a goal in group-stage matches against France, Hungary and the Soviet Union. Despite finishing bottom of the pile, it was Canada's best performance at a men's World Cup; it remains their only appearance at a finals to date.

Now, 36 years later, Canada have qualified for the 2022 World Cup with apparent ease, finishing top of the third round octagonal ahead of Mexico and the United States, defeating both regional heavyweights in the process. But the convincing nature of this success in qualifying made it easy to forget how big a moment this actually is for Canadian football.

A quick glance at the country's World Cup qualification record in previous years soon helps one fully appreciate the achievement.

Between 1986 and 2022, the closest Canada came to reaching the tournament proper was ahead of the 1994 World Cup. Aided by the fact that the US, as hosts, were not taking part in CONCACAF qualifying, Canada made it to the inter-confederational play-offs. After a 3-3 draw with Australia over two legs, they were eliminated on penalties, and had to watch on enviously as the tournament took place just over the border.

In other years, Canada have regularly come unstuck against Central American or Caribbean nations, and only twice have they made it to the final round of qualifying itself.

With all of this in mind, finishing top of the pile in qualifying for 2022 is already an historic achievement, regardless of what happens in Qatar. But the idea that World Cup qualification is the end of this journey isn't the mindset back in Canada.

If the team had remained content to merely make up the numbers, they wouldn't have qualified in the first place. The belief within the camp and a desire to upset the odds – or rather an ignorance of the odds or any idea they are not favourites before any given game – has played a big part in getting them to this stage. It will play a big part in Qatar, too.

"Our goal is to go as far as we can in this tournament," says Canada and Toronto FC midfielder Jonathan Osorio. "For us, it's not about just participating – we want to compete in this World Cup, we want to surprise, and we want to play as many games as we can in the tournament. We believe we can get out of our group, and that will be our aim.

"A lot of people may think it was a surprise that we qualified first in the [CONCACAF] region but, to be honest, we had that vision ▸

Spectacular...Tajon Buchanan's acrobatic celebration v Jamaica

Mastermind... Canada manager John Herdman

from a long time ago; we had that vision from the beginning of qualifying. As long as we believe in ourselves we know we can achieve many things.

"The group [draw] is really difficult. It has three really, really good opponents, but we believe we can compete and we can get ourselves out of the group."

The vision Osorio speaks of has been in place for some time. Though the results have only been seen in recent years, the groundwork for them has been put in place throughout the previous decade and beyond.

Paul Stalteri, who played his club football in Europe for Werder Bremen and Tottenham Hotspur among others, earned 84 caps for Canada between 1997 and 2010. Though these were barren years in terms of World Cup qualification, the team did see some success with a Gold Cup win in 2000.

Towards the end of his time as a Canada player, Stalteri could see the beginnings of the work being put in, across the country and from its soccer federation, that laid the platform for success in 2022.

"You wouldn't say that in the last two, three, or four years, all of a sudden we've changed, it's something that has been in play for a number of years," says Stalteri, who is now an assistant coach at Toronto FC. "That changed well over a decade ago in terms of how we're developing players, how we're developing coaches, and how we're developing the game in Canada.

"Ten years or so ago, the country changed their entire youth development, they changed the way kids at the grassroots level play.

"Then you obviously had the professional academies in Canada and in MLS teams that were coming into play in the last decade or so. That also had a key role in developing players and taking them to another level.

"People like Tony Fonseca, who came in – he changed a lot of the programme when he was the technical director of Canada.

"He had a different vision, ten to 12 years ago when he was in charge, and you see a lot of those things coming through now.

"Victor Montagliani, when he was president of the Canada Soccer Association [from 2012-2016], had a long-term vision of where the country could be and he wanted to see us qualifying and hosting a World Cup.

"Things like that were unheard of ten to 15 years ago, that was never something people thought would be possible."

There is humility about the Canada group, and about this whole Canada set-up. But there is also confidence, a belief in their own ability, and a determination to succeed.

Alphonso Davies has emerged as a global star in recent years since his successful move from Vancouver Whitecaps to Bayern Munich, while Lille's Jonathan David has become a goal machine for club and country. David is on course to eventually break Canada's all-time goalscoring record, previously held by Dwayne De Rosario and recently broken by Cyle Larin, who at 27 also has at least two World Cups left in him.

When these star players arrive for the national team, they complement the group rather than define it. From experienced senior players such as Atiba Hutchinson and Milan Borjan to the likes of 21-year-old Davies and 22-year-old David, any one of the players on the roster can be the star on any given day, in any given game.

"We have a really good mix of young players and experienced players, and then those players kind of in-between," says Osorio, who scored Canada's game-tying goal against Mexico

Young talents...(from left to right) Tajon Buchanan, Jonathan David and Alphonso Davies celebrate a goal in qualifying

> "It's not about just participating – we want to compete in this World Cup, we want to surprise, and we want to play as many games as we can"
>
> **Canada midfielder Jonathan Osorio**

at the Estadio Azteca in qualifying. "It's a really, really good mix, and it works really well. I think even the more experienced players are actually playing some of the best football for the national team they've ever played in their careers.

"We help each other. The experienced players help the young players perform, and the young players help the experienced players perform.

"The big thing is that we all respect each other equally. We all look at each other like brothers. No matter where you play or what you've done, everybody looks at each other the same and is treated the same way.

"At the end of the day, we know that we're all going for the same goal."

There is also respect for opponents, which stems from preparation and a knowledge of what to expect and how to approach each game.

This was especially important, as Canada's path through World Cup qualifying was a long one. At the start of the campaign they weren't ranked highly enough to get a bye to the third round, so had to compete in a first-round group stage and a second round play-off before making it to the final group of eight.

From defeating the Cayman Islands 11-0 in March 2021, to defeating the United States 2-0 in Hamilton in January 2022, each opponent has needed to be taken seriously, especially bearing in mind previous World Cup qualification hiccups occurred before they even got to face the likes of the United States and Mexico.

Coach John Herdman has played a big part in this success, instilling team spirit and adaptable tactics built around some core principles. He's been the ideal figure to lead the team at this stage of their development.

Joyous...50-cap midfielder Jonathan Osorio celebrates the victory over Jamaica

"From the first game he took over he made a point that he wanted the team to be one of the most adaptable teams in the region," Osorio says of his national team coach. "We ended up becoming the most adaptable team in the region, in the way we are flexible and can play different formations and different styles.

"Every game he had a plan and he would adapt. Every game was different. Every game had different tactics, but with the same principles, and that made it very easy for us to catch on really quick."

Herdman's grounding in Canadian football came in the women's game. The women's national team are regulars at the World Cup and reached the quarter-finals under his guidance in 2015.

This will have helped convince the Canadian Soccer Association that he could help bring the men's national team up to the level of the women's. With the nation co-hosting the 2026 Men's World Cup alongside the US and Mexico, it was important to prove they would not just be making up the numbers four years down the line.

Qualifying for Qatar in the manner in which they did has shown Canada are now a force in the region, and potentially a force in world soccer. As hosts, they should not need to go through qualifying for the 2026 tournament, so it was important they showed their quality and earned their place this time around.

"The bar should be set now that we've qualified for 2022. 2026 is most likely an automatic one, and then from then on in you're looking at qualifying every time for every World Cup going forward," says Stalteri.

Osorio adds: "With the experience of this World Cup, we will be a better team going into the next one for sure.

"I think now the expectations will definitely rise, but yeah, right now we're focusing on this one and going step by step."

The most recent step of qualification for Qatar 2022 was the greatest, perhaps in the history of Canadian men's football, but just like those goal records, it is likely to be eclipsed again in the near future.

It was just one game on a Sunday evening in Toronto, but that moment witnessed the culmination of more than a decade's work on and off the field.

The emotional release was evident as some players collapsed to the freezing turf, Herdman skipped onto the pitch, and Canadian flags flew, just as they will be flying at the next two World Cups.

eyewitness

Henry Flynn reports

NORWAY

Nordic nearly men

It's somewhat surprising that a team blessed with Erling Haaland's goalscoring touch, Martin Odegaard's finesse and a collection of promising elite-level players will be absent from Qatar. But failing to qualify for the best competitions is the norm for Norway. It's a habit that dates back to Euro 2000 and will continue until 2024, if not longer.

Scandinavian counterparts Denmark and Sweden have continually made the grade, while Iceland and Finland have recently entered the frame too. For their Nordic neighbour, though, the wait goes on.

After two decades of mediocrity – epitomised by previous coach Lars Lagerback's three-year tenure – former Wolverhampton Wanderers boss Stale Solbakken is now at the helm and leads a team brimming with talent. Many squad members are familiar to English fans – Joshua King, Alexander Sorloth, Mohamed Elyounoussi, Sander Berge and Kristoffer Ajer – who have enjoyed relative success across Europe.

Yet in spite of the undoubted talent that exists, international progress has not followed. Norway finished third, behind the Netherlands and Turkey, in their qualifying group for the Qatar World Cup, having lost to Serbia in the play-offs for Euro 2020.

But optimism remains, thanks to a steady manager now leading ▸

Nordic nearly men ...Norway players react after failing to progress from their World Cup qualifying group

this talented generation. At least that's according to Tor Thodesen, a professional coach who has promoted and managed top-flight sides in Norway and Finland.

"We need just a few more players doing well in better foreign leagues while our most promising young players – Odegaard, Haaland, Berge and Ajer – gain a couple more years of experience," he reasons.

"I believe the interest and backing of the team were at their lowest in the latter stages of Lagerback's reign. He was no longer able to make players believe in his approach. They felt it was too much about low risk, perhaps even out-dated.

"From Solbakken's point of view, he came in at the right moment: too late to make a full impact on qualification for Qatar, but still very much wanted. He is much more open and more direct in his communication, and people respect him for his way of simplifying the approach to what the team is about."

Still, Norway's inability to push on will remain a minor mystery until their moment finally arrives. So why have they continued to underperform?

Stig Arve Saether, a Norwegian sports researcher, presents a few theories. One revolves around youth players and how coaches prioritise their personal development over intense competitions, potentially impacting them in the long term.

"People have associated us with a sporting model different to other countries," he says. "We have less focus on performance and selection among younger players."

"We have some rules stating that before players reach 13, there should not be much focus on winning games, tables or which side is top of the league. Sticking to this approach or not is the debate in terms of talent development.

"An age-specific national coach saw that the results of younger teams were quite good, but the development after was poor," he adds.

The quality is there for all to see. But the details around it perhaps need more attention. Some breakout stars have caught the eye before fading under pressure when moving to the major leagues. Two instances stand out.

LEFT: Boy wonder... Martin Odegaard after joining Real Madrid as a teenager

BELOW: Golden generation?... Norway's talented squad is yet to deliver on its huge promise

Now fully integrated at Arsenal, Odegaard's short stint at Norwegian first-division Stromgodset was so impressive that Real Madrid came calling before he was ready to shine with the best. Meanwhile, Sorloth's goals vanished at Crystal Palace in the Premier League. Soon after, he couldn't stop scoring for Trabzonspor in Turkey.

Saether hints that a lack of player continuity and consistency at club level may hinder Norway's national set-up.

He adds: "In terms of player development, many players leave Norway early, then return to Norway and don't get their professional contract. That eagerness or impatient thinking means many players go abroad, sometimes too early, at demanding clubs.

"Their problems could be because of a bad choice of club, a lack of motivation to take the next step and maybe a lack of playing time."

Another dimension is how Norway views football as a whole. Although it remains the country's most popular sport, other sporting disciplines offer a much more realistic chance of success.

Since the 1990s, when Norway briefly climbed to second in the FIFA rankings under manager Egil Olsen, other sports have been prioritised – particularly winter ones, such as alpine and cross-country skiing. Meanwhile,

football has fallen by the wayside. There is a lack of competitive drive that, according to Saether, may be self-inflicted.

"Norway is one of the best countries in terms of healthcare and a place to live. We have a social democratic state, meaning it's relatively safe to fall ill or lose your job.

"That might be a bit of a drawback for some players because, if they fail, no problem. That is different for others, whose success can secure their family's future."

As for Norway's first division, the stunning rise of Bodo/Glimt has boosted the domestic game's status. Bowing out to Dinamo Zagreb in the Champions League play-off round was a blow – but two outstanding Europa Conference League triumphs against Jose Mourinho's Roma side will live long in the memory. And this campaign they will now come up against Premier League giants Arsenal in the Europa League.

Although the northern club has competed with the best in Norway before, its resourcefulness to win two consecutive league titles and make an impact in Europe – all on a limited budget – has loosened Rosenberg and Molde's stronghold on the division and raised the league's profile.

"The main reason for our success over the last few seasons is simply hard work from our coaching team and our players," says Magnus, a member of Bodo/Glimt's fan club. "We have also seen players who weren't good enough for the Norwegian top league in 2016 turn into absolutely class players in some European games.

"I think players like Joel Mvuka and Isak Amundsen will be a surprise to some big European teams this season," he adds, noting two Norwegians whose careers have taken off there.

Lamentably, The Yellow Horde's heroics bear little resemblance to the overall strength of football in the Eliteserien, the Norwegian top flight. In Norway, a large but sparsely populated country of just over five million people, football attendances are typically low, and clubs lack the investment found elsewhere on the continent.

"Eliteserien football is not good enough as of today," says Erik Baalmaan, another fan-club member. "There are three to four other teams that aspire to compete seriously in Europe and have the financial muscle for it; Molde, Rosenborg, Viking and Valerenga. All the other teams enjoy occasional success.

Superstar... Erling Haaland

"Wages are low compared to other European leagues, making the best players leave for European clubs and multiply their salaries. I think the average attendance at Eliteserien matches is around 7,000 to 8,000, which doesn't help the clubs' financial status.

> "It's great to have big stars, as Haaland has become, but it's a team sport and he can only do so much"

"I would rate the Eliteserien at about the same level as the Danish or Swedish leagues, but certainly a bit behind the Dutch, Belgian and some in Eastern Europe.

"Glimt are performing above their level, which is amazing, and – if they can keep it up – this will improve the Eliteserien also."

Yet while there is a clear link between the Norwegian champions and the national team, there is one man that takes centre stage above all others. If anybody can end Norway's wait for success, it is Manchester City superstar Erling Haaland. Having such a weapon can only be a plus for Solbakken, assuming he gets the balance right.

The forward averages well over a goal every two games, but that hasn't yet been enough to get Norway over the line in qualifying.

"It's great to have big stars, as Haaland has become, but it's a team sport and he can only do so much as a striker," says Saether. "Of course, if you don't get the ball, you can't do many things."

In short, Haaland needs help. "There's quite an intriguing generation now, with many players in England, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy," adds Saether. "But yes, everyone has been surprised and overwhelmed by Haaland."

When Norway's time comes is anyone's guess, but arguably its most keen influence has not been on the pitch itself. Since being given hosting responsibility, Qatar's eligibility to host the biggest celebration of football has been in question, and the European nation has become its most outspoken critic.

Poorly-treated workers have died in preparing Qatar for the World Cup, and the country's strict social laws have left many feeling unwelcome in the Gulf state. This has led to vociferous opposition to the tournament, rallied by Eliteserien side Tromso.

And while the Norwegian football association ultimately decided against a boycott, Norway's role in proceedings has shown – for all its shortcomings – its obligation is not just to win.

Qatar protests ...Norway's players took a stand against the 2022 World Cup hosts

The Braut dynasty

WORDS: Josh Butler

Footballing dynasty ...Erling Haaland

Despite a population of a little over five million, Norway can boast two prestigious footballing families. In Vestland, the small village of Flo is the ancestral home of the family that shares its name. Stroll along the branches of the Flo family tree and you'll find it budding with familiar names: from brothers Tore Andre and Jostein to Havard and his nephew Per Egil.

Further north, hailing from the arctic town of Bodo, are the Bergs, the only family in Norway to have had three generations represent their country at the highest level: Harald, Orjan and, presently, Patrick.

But there is a third family that has grown in prominence and whose exponents may someday come to match the renown of the Flos and the Bergs. The most famous, Manchester City's Erling Braut Haaland, is familiar to football fans the world over. Already racing up Norway's list of record goalscorers, Haaland was actually born in England while his father, Alf-Inge, played in the Premier League for Leeds United and Manchester City. Like father like son, right? To an extent, yes – but that doesn't tell the whole story.

The secret lies within his middle name; Erling owes his natural footballing ability as much to his maternal genes as his father's.

The roots of the Braut family tree lie deep within the soil of Bryne, a town on the southern shores of the lake Froylandsvatnet, where Inger Ase Hoyland Braut, a former Norwegian international athlete, was born and raised. The grandmother of Erling – and incidentally, the sister of

Bryne's most-capped player, Gabriel Hoyland – she has three daughters herself, all of whom have produced professional footballers.

In recent years, the Braut name has come to the fore of Norwegian consciousness thanks to this prodigious crop of footballers. Erling Haaland is at the forefront of attention, but three of his younger cousins currently play professionally throughout Norway. Given their familial association with arguably the best young footballer on the planet, great things are expected of the promising trio.

Of the three, Jonatan Braut Brunes is perhaps the most established. The 22-year-old made his top-flight debut for Lillestrom last season, before joining Stromsgodset in the summer. According to Norwegian journalist Jonas Giaever, there are some comparisons to be made with his more famous cousin: "He's a typical goalscorer. Not exactly like Erling, but quite close. He's very good at playing with his back to goal – a pure number nine and someone who is able to interact with his team-mates."

Born just two weeks after Erling, Brunes' ascent has been much less explosive, but he found his feet on loan in the second tier at Start last season. After 12 goals in 15 games – including hat-tricks against Sogndal and Asane – he caught the eye of Stromsgodset.

"I think next season is the one where we will really get to see him," says Giaever. "If he performs, I expect him to leave [for Europe] rather quickly because of his name. Nobody will want to miss out on him."

Another of the Brauts making significant waves is Haaland's 18-year-old cousin Albert Braut Tjaaland, who gained a degree of Internet fame last year following some hyperbolic reporting on his goal return for Molde. In reality, Tjaaland has only played once for the four-time champions, but his record at youth level is remarkable.

Quite how many goals he scored in the academy of his hometown club Byrne is unclear, with some outlets claiming it was as many as 69 in just 37 matches. Whatever the exact truth, it was undoubtedly a lot, and earned his move to Molde, where he continued to impress in the youth ranks.

This season he is back at Byrne on loan, scoring seven goals in his first seven matches for the reserves. Stats like that for an 18-year-old make for an eye-catching read, especially with his familial links – even if the goals have been scored in the fifth tier of Norwegian football.

"He's a talent, but he's been loaned out a few times," Giaever explains. "He probably needs time to mature and grow into his body." Tjaaland, much like Haaland and Brunes, is considered something of an athletic specimen, measuring at comfortably over six feet in height, with more growing left to do.

However, the Braut genes are not reserved solely for men. Brunes' younger sister, Emma, is highly regarded in the world of women's football. In direct contrast to her free-scoring family members, she is a centre-back by trade, currently playing for Kolbotn. Aged just 18, she started 18 out of 18 league matches last season, and has also made several appearances for Norway's youth teams.

Growing up so close in age and within such a tight-knit family means the four young footballers are in regular contact according to Giaever, who notes that Brunes – despite his occasional exasperation at the constant comparisons to his older cousin – looks to Haaland for advice and guidance.

It remains to be seen the extent of the impact both Brunes siblings and Tjaaland will make on the world of football, especially given the lofty expectations set by their older cousin, but nevertheless, the Braut family can remain proud they are making their mark across Norway and beyond.

Perhaps in years to come, Norwegians will reminisce not only of the Flos and the Bergs but of the Brauts too.

Internet sensation... Albert Braut Tjaaland

Erling's cousin... Jonatan Braut Brunes

eyewitness

Joe Phelan reports

AUSTRALIA

The world's most isolated major football club

Club legend... Jamie Harnwell

Isolated...Perth Glory's HBF Park

Perth, the largest city in the state of Western Australia, is one of the most isolated major conurbations on the planet. Geographically it's closer to Jakarta in Indonesia than it is to Sydney, Australia's biggest city.

Home to around two million people, Perth is famous for its pristine beaches and fantastic architecture, as well as a burgeoning community of multi-millionaires. The two wealthiest neighbourhoods in the country are in Perth, populated largely by people who've made their money from the mining sector.

As anyone from Perth will attest to, it's also a city that's mad about sport. The Eagles and the Dockers, two of the country's most popular AFL teams, are based there, as are the Perth Wildcats, Australia's most decorated basketball team. Daniel Ricciardo, one of the biggest names in Formula 1, is a Perth native, as are Justin Langer, one of Australia's great cricketers, and Margaret Court, winner of 64 major tennis titles across singles, women's doubles and mixed doubles.

All manner of elite athletes, from sailors to surfers, rowers to swimmers, from all corners of the globe, find themselves drawn to Perth because of its mix of world-class facilities and unparalleled natural environment; for anyone with a sporting bent, Perth is unarguably one of the most attractive locations in which to live, train and excel.

It should come as no surprise then that Perth Glory, the A-League's only Western Australian team, is seen by many as such an attractive proposition.

"I always refer to Perth as a big country town," Jamie Harnwell, a former Perth Glory captain and the club's record appearance maker, tells *World Soccer*. "It's a laidback lifestyle, the weather is great, and the beaches are fantastic. There is also the opportunity to drive an hour in any direction and feel like you are away from it all."

A number of notable foreign names – including Daniel Sturridge and Robbie Fowler – have ventured down under to ply their trade with the Glory, and as the A-League continues to develop and grow, it's likely even more stars will follow in their footsteps. "Perth is such an attractive, family-friendly place to live in terms of the environment and climate," adds Gareth Morgan, manager of media and communications at Perth Glory – and die-hard fan. "For players coming from Europe, it's the nearest of all the major Australian cities. Plus, there's also the history of the club and the matchday atmosphere."

> The Glory are one of only two current A-League sides to have also played in its predecessor, the National Soccer League (NSL), under their same name

The Glory are one of only two current A-League sides to have also played in its predecessor, the National Soccer League (NSL), under their same name. The other side, Adelaide United, played in the NSL for just one season before the league collapsed. According to Morgan, this history plays a huge part in the Glory's identity. They finished top of the table

three times in the final years of the competition, including the last-ever edition in 2003-04, when they also went on to win the Grand Final.

"Glory dominated the latter years of the NSL," says Morgan. "We're very proud of that heritage, and also of being Western Australia's only representative."

People from Western Australia consider themselves to be very different, and to some degree separate, from those who live on the more populated east coast. Community, loyalty and devotion are common character traits throughout the state, and that's felt firmly within the club itself.

"Support has always been synonymous with Perth Glory," Harnwell notes. "To have 18,000-odd people attending NSL games for a club that was only a couple of years old was incredible, and it was always a fantastic atmosphere to play in. This success in drawing crowds and interest really showed the rest of Australia how a club could engage with the community and market themselves."

NSL champions ...Glory celebrate winning the last-ever NSL Grand Final in 2004

"There is a strong current of parochialism within the community and the club," adds Morgan. "Among the fanbase, there's a perception that the east coast clubs are treated more favourably, and that feeds into an 'us against the world' mentality."

For football fans in Western Australia, there really is little option – from both a practical and civic perspective – but to support Perth Glory. Consequently, the club has a passionate, dedicated fanbase – and it's one that is not only growing, but spreading across the country. "The club remains an important part of the community, and we often refer to the 'Glory family' to describe the club, the members and the fans," Morgan says. "We have a hard core of passionate and dedicated members who have stuck with us through some very tough times. They are the lifeblood of the club.

"The Shed Supporters Club are among the most vocal and dedicated in the country, and each year they organise a 'Tour of Duty' event which sees around

150 of them travel to an away game en masse. What's more, we also have a growing number of very dedicated fans based on the east coast who attend our games there," Morgan adds.

While Perth itself is a modern city stuffed with attractions and amenities, there's no escaping the fact that it's a secluded outpost on the very edge of the Australian continent; there are no nearby cities, and therefore the Glory don't have a local rival. Its most neighbourly opponent, Adelaide United, is 2,700 km (1,677 miles) away. That's a 29-hour drive. To put that into some perspective, the longest trip in the English Football League is Carlisle United to Plymouth Argyle – a comparatively short 390 miles.

As a result, the Glory have developed a somewhat unique rivalry with New Zealand-based Wellington Phoenix, located over 5,255 km (3,270 miles) away. Known as the "Distance Derby", it's probably the furthest away game anywhere in domestic football.

"It's a rivalry that's very much tongue-in-cheek," Morgan admits.

According to Harnwell, Perth's isolation has both drawbacks and advantages when it comes to competing in Australia's top-tier competition.

"The travel as a player can build up when every second week you are going across the country. But, on the positive side, it was always a challenge for teams travelling from the east to play in Perth," he says.

Harnwell is also keen to point out that during his time representing the Glory, the positives massively outweighed the negatives, and he admits he has particular memories he will cherish for the rest of his life.

"In terms of playing, there are a couple [of key highlights]. The first and foremost is the two Championships that we won in the NSL. We had a great group of players and a good mix of youth, experience, homegrown talent and imports, and after having lost two Grand Finals, it was a huge relief to win them.

"Second is being put up front later in my career and scoring a hat-trick in my second game [a 4–1 win against the New Zealand Knights]. That was really satisfying from a personal point of view. Outside of the playing, the best memories are of my team-mates and the camaraderie. We spent a lot of time together training and travelling, and had some great fun," Harnwell says.

Big-name signings... Robbie Fowler and Daniel Sturridge

> "We have a hard core of passionate and dedicated members who have stuck with us through some very tough times. They are the lifeblood of the club"
>
> **Gareth Morgan, Perth Glory media manager**

Of course, as with most football clubs, it goes without saying that Perth Glory has challenges to address, and hurdles that need to be overcome. Other sports, namely AFL, are hugely popular in Western Australia, and so, according to Morgan, there's a constant battle to attract new fans. Additionally, the club's – and the league's – limited resources, plus the fact the Glory don't own either their stadium or training ground, are always back of mind.

However, Morgan admits that, while there are certain difficulties, Perth's location and strong reputation bring opportunities.

"We are the only professional football club in a state the size of Western Europe, and in which football is by far the largest participation sport. The challenge is to convert those players into match-attending members and fans," he says.

So, what next for the Glory, and for the A-League in general?

"The A-Leagues, both men's and women's, are certainly improving," Harnwell says. "The last couple of years have seen some incredible disruptions with COVID, especially with Perth Glory having to spend significant amounts of time on the east coast due to border closures and quarantine requirements. This meant games were being played at different times and days, which was a challenge for supporters to follow and attend games, but with a proper run at this season, the crowds and interest will no doubt jump again."

Well supported... Perth Glory fans

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SENEGAL'S MAIN MANE

After firing Senegal to the AFCON trophy and World Cup qualification, Sadio Mane has plenty more to achieve with his country in 2022

Words: Nick Bidwell

Senegal's joyous march to the last eight of the 2002 World Cup – the west African nation's best-ever performance in the competition – was feistily spearheaded by effervescent forward El Hadji Diouf, a trash-talking player whose attachment to gamesmanship so often left him alienated and unloved.

Two decades on, the Lions of Teranga, reigning African champions and a solid bet to go deep at Qatar 2022, boast a totally different type of standard-bearer: the unassuming and humble character that is deluxe frontrunner and national team talisman Sadio Mane.

Growing up in his hometown of Bambali in southern Senegal, the young Mane was entranced by Diouf's flair and directness. But there was never any chance of Sadio embracing his idol's provocative on-field persona, the sort of blatant opponent baiting which Diouf famously utilised in Senegal's much-chronicled 1-0 victory over France in the opening game of the 2002 World Cup.

Deriving his material from the fact that the Senegalese squad were staying at the same hotel as the French players' ▶

10
18

nearest and dearest, Diouf was in outrageous sledging mode throughout that game in Seoul. A constant irritant, he particularly targeted France defender Franck Leboeuf – and the chicanery worked. Leboeuf had a stinker.

Mane, who recently moved to Bayern Munich after six highly-successful years with Liverpool, has never had any use for the dark arts of incitement and distraction. All that counts in his book is total dedication to his football craft (training, nutrition and copious amounts of sleep), his Islamic faith, his family and the numerous infrastructure projects he has financed in Bambali: the mosque, the school, the hospital, the library, the stadium, the petrol station.

He's also donated food, clothes, shoes, sportswear and computer equipment, as well as giving €70 a month to every inhabitant of the Sedhiou region. "Why would I want ten Ferraris, 20 diamond watches and two planes?" he said to Ghanaian website *Nsemwoha*. "Today, thanks to what I earn from football, I can help my people."

Born with the heart the size of a bucket and an inextinguishable flame of ambition, Mane claimed in an interview with *France Football* magazine back in January 2017 that he never doubted he would make a name for himself in the game. "All I ever wanted was to become a pro footballer and play for a big club. That was the dream and it came true. Thank God."

Nothing was going to stand in his way of his career aspirations. At the age of 15, he was even prepared to rebel against his own family, who had refused to allow him to drop out of school and dedicate himself to the round ball. Sadio's response? To run away, catching a bus for the Senegalese capital Dakar. His family eventually located him and a compromise deal had to be struck. He would agree to return home but only on the condition that they would let him resume his football quest at the end of the school year.

He subsequently set up home in the city of Mbour (90km to the south of Dakar) where he lodged with an uncle. In Mbour, a hot-bed of Senegalese football, he quickly found a club to take him on and shortly afterwards was spotted and recruited by Generation Foot, a Dakar-based academy with links to French side Metz. Mane would start his pro career in the maroon of the *Messins*, spending a season (2011-12) there before moving onwards and upwards to Red Bull Salzburg, Southampton and Liverpool.

Current Senegal coach Aliou Cisse distilled the essence of Sadio during a press conference at the 2018 World Cup. "Sadio gives you everything he has. He is among the best-ever Senegalese players, if not the best of all. To coach a guy like that is extraordinary. Moreover, he treats everyone with a rare simplicity. Many others would have changed. Not him."

"All I ever wanted was to become a pro footballer and play for a big club. That was the dream and it came true. Thank God"

Disappointment... Senegal exited the 2018 World Cup in the group stage

Mane is happy to let his football do his talking, and how eloquently his feet spoke in the international arena in 2022. In February, he scored the winning kick as Senegal beat Egypt on penalties in the final of the Africa Cup of Nations, thus clinching the Lions' first-ever competitive trophy. Spookily, just seven weeks later, the exact same scenario repeated itself, Mane successfully concluding another shootout triumph over the luckless Egyptians, this time in a win-or-bust qualifier for Qatar 2022.

In the AFCON final, he experienced both the pain and the ecstasy of the 11-metre exercise, failing to convert a mere seven minutes into the game, only to redeem himself with the victorious kick in the shootout. Mane, later to be voted Player of the Tournament, had come through a trial by fire, emerging unscathed from the ultimate of stress tests.

"Usually when I miss a penalty, I'm on the floor," Mane revealed after the final. "Because of my experience and my desire to win for the Senegalese

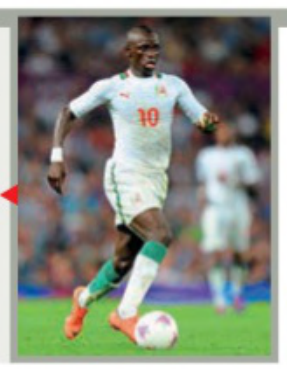
Trailblazer... El Hadji Diouf starring at the 2002 World Cup

Timeline

JAN 2012
Makes his senior professional debut for Metz in the French second tier after joining from Generation Foot.

JUN 2012
Scores on his international debut in a 3-1 win over Liberia in 2014 World Cup qualifying.

AUG 2012
Starts every match as Senegal reach the quarter-finals of the 2012 Olympics, losing 4-2 after extra-time to eventual champions Mexico.



NOV 2013
Starts the second leg of Senegal's crucial World Cup qualifying play-off against Ivory Coast, as they lose 4-2 on aggregate and miss out on Brazil 2014.

SEP 2014
Joins Southampton from Red Bull Salzburg for a fee of £11.8m.

JAN 2015
Misses the start of AFCON 2015 with a calf injury, before taking part in Senegal's group-stage exit.

Legend... Mane lifts the AFCON trophy

people, this match was completely different. I had the motivation to carry on and to believe. Before the shootout, my team-mates came up to me and told me they had faith in me; that they were all behind me. That helped me forget the pressure. I was concentrated; every breath in my body was up for the task."

Full credit to Mane for holding his nerve at this most critical of moments. The relief would have been palpable. Over the years, he had made a habit of fluffing penalties in the Cup of Nations, missing from the spot in Senegal's shootout loss to Cameroon at the quarter-final stage in 2017 and failing to convert in wins over Kenya and Uganda in the 2019 edition, a tournament in which his side lost out to Algeria in the final.

Such misses can damage the strongest of psyches. And for Mane, the scars were still fresh. Just five years previously, after his kick was saved in the AFCON shootout defeat to Cameroon, a sobbing Sadio was so distraught he barely could walk off the pitch without officials and team-mates holding him up. It takes guts and mental fortitude to go back to the scene of the crime, to slay the demons which once laid him low.

The Senegal Class of 2022 is very much awash with high calibre players, the leading lights including Chelsea goalkeeper Edouard Mendy, centre-back Kalidou Koulibaly (also Chelsea), Leicester City defensive midfielder Nampalys Mendy and winger Ismaila Sarr (Watford). However Mane is the one man they cannot do without, the world-class game-changer equally adept at loading and firing the attacking bullets. Not only is he Senegal's all-time top marksman with 33 goals. He also boasts 20 assists in 91 international appearances.

Qatar 2022 looks, on the face of it, to be a made-to-measure stage for him. At 30 years of age, he is at the peak of his powers; looks especially energised by a set of fresh challenges at Bayern Munich and has lashings of big-tournament experience. All told, he has appeared in six; his initiation coming in the 2012 Olympic Games

MAY 2015
Scores three times in just two minutes and 56 seconds against Aston Villa to set a new Premier League record for the fastest hat-trick.

JUN 2016
Becomes the most expensive African player of all time after joining Liverpool for a fee of £34m.

JAN 2017
Scores twice en route to the quarter-finals of AFCON 2017, but misses in the penalty shootout as Senegal are eliminated by Cameroon.

JUN 2018
Starts all three of Senegal's group-stage matches at the 2018 World Cup in Russia, as his side finish below Japan on fair play points.

JUL 2019
Scores three goals on the way to the AFCON 2019 final, earning a spot in the Team of the Tournament, yet sees his team lose 1-0 to Algeria.

in London. "I have very good memories of those Games," he recalled in *France Football*. "We were eliminated by Mexico, the eventual winners, at the quarter-final stage. It was great to have the entire Senegalese nation behind us."

A tally of 24 Champions League goals for Liverpool over the past five seasons offer incontrovertible evidence of his effectiveness at the highest level. With his explosive speed, quick feet and instantaneous changes of direction, he represents a 90-minute headache for defenders. According to those who know him well, his unique feints and body swerves were honed by an erstwhile love of dancing to zouk, a fast-tempo French Antillean musical genre.

Key clash...Mane takes on his then-Liverpool team-mate Mohamed Salah during World Cup qualifying

An impressive showing at a World Cup is the one item lacking on his honours board. He already has a ton of prizes stashed away: two African Footballer of the Year awards (2019

JAN 2020

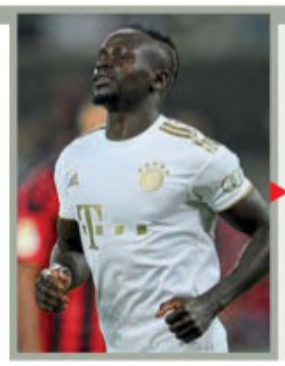
Wins the 2019 African Footballer of the Year award, only the second Senegalese player to do so after El Hadji Diouf.

FEB 2022

Scores the decisive penalty in the final, and wins the Player of the Tournament award, as Senegal clinch their first-ever AFCON title by beating Egypt.

MAR 2022

In a repeat of the AFCON final, Mane again scores the decisive penalty kick to beat Egypt, this time in the final play-off for World Cup qualification.



JUN 2022

Hits a hat-trick in a 3-1 win against Benin to overtake Henri Camara as Senegal's all-time top scorer with 32 goals, shortly before joining Bayern.

JUL 2022

Is voted African Footballer of the Year for the second time, thus becoming only the tenth player to win the award on more than one occasion.

> "The World Cup is my new dream. I want to believe in projects that are a little crazy and winning the World Cup with Senegal is one"

and 2022), Africa Cup of Nations gold and a host of trophies with Liverpool (Premier League, Champions League, World Club Cup and FA Cup). Yet at the World Cup level, he has achieved precious little, only appearing in one tournament, in Russia in 2018. Starting all three of the Lions' matches that summer, he managed just one goal (in a 2-2 draw with Japan) and was unable to prevent Senegal's group phase elimination, albeit only on fair-play criteria after finishing level on points with the Japanese.

For someone of his calibre, a mere 270 minutes of World Cup finals action represents a surprisingly insubstantial back catalogue. Qatar 2022 could well be his last opportunity to make an impact at football's number one event. Mane is not solely interested in emulating the best African performers at a World Cup – quarter-finalists Cameroon (1990), Senegal (2002) and Ghana (2010). He is aiming higher still. "The World Cup is my new dream," revealed Mane in an interview with *France Football* magazine early this year. "I want to believe in projects that are a little crazy and winning the World Cup with Senegal is one."

As he has proved so many times, he simply does not shirk under pressure. See his shootout exploits of late and his lack of trepidation on swapping Southampton for the exclusivity of Anfield in the summer of 2016. Costing £34 million, he was the most expensive African player at the time. Yet never seemed burdened by the fee.

Mane certainly has come a long way since his childhood days of impromptu football matches in Bambali, contests on muddy wasteland or patches of overgrown grass, where he would either go barefoot or sport dilapidated plastic boots. Now he exists in another stratosphere altogether, widely acknowledged as one of the best players in the world. Senegal's triumph at the Africa Cup of Nations has elevated him to a new dimension, to the rank of national icon.

Similar to a Didier Drogba in the Ivory Coast, Cameroon's Roger Milla and Samuel Eto'o, or George Weah in Liberia, Sadio Mane transcends sport these days. He is a brand, a revered ambassador for his country.

Not that Senegalese supporters and journalists have always rushed to embrace him. For quite some time, he was a divisive figure, often accused of not translating his excellent club form to the national team. The goals did not flow as freely as some expected and this often became a stick to beat him with, particularly during a six-match international goal drought in 2019.

"There was a lot of criticism of him," declared Jules Boucher, the coach who brought him to Generation Foot. "After the World Cup in 2018 and the Africa Cup of Nations the following year, you would hear people say that he was not putting in enough effort for Senegal, that he was not rolling up his sleeves."

The Senegalese must be a hard community to please. Mane never has been one to coast on the field of play. Energy and work ethic are his definitive calling cards.

Many of the naysayers simply misunderstand Mane's ability as a leader. Although Kalidou Koulibaly wears the Senegal armband, Mane is the team's inspiration and leader, setting the tone and example with his attitude. The widespread assumption is that a leader should be a warrior king and be vocal. Mane, however, is neither. "When I knew him as a teenager, he already had leadership qualities," says Jules Boucher. "He was calm, disciplined, sincere and most important of all, very efficient."

Senegal will require more than Mane's goals and assists in Qatar. His low-key command of the squad, the respect he generates, will be critical too if he is to achieve his "crazy" objectives.

One to watch ...a poster of Mane in Qatar's capital city Doha

WORLD CUP
ONES TO WATCH

Nick Bidwell takes a closer look at 50 World Cup wild cards to keep an eye out for at this year's tournament in Qatar

ALPHONSO DAVIES

(Canada)
About to take part in their first World Cup in 36 years, Canada continue to rely heavily on players with a Vancouver connection. Back in 1986, the last time the Maple Leafs reached the FIFA main event, long-serving Vancouver Whitecaps servant Bob Lenarduzzi was the team's trusty right-back and now, in a distinct Pacific remake – albeit left-footed and on the other flank – the wing-back berth is splendidly occupied by skilful Bayern Munich speedster "Phonzy" Davies, who started his professional career with the Caps only six years ago.

The Bundesliga-based Davies, who will only turn 22 a couple of weeks before the finals, normally plays left-back for Bayern. However, Canada coach John Herdman prefers his most important asset to run free, ostensibly lining up on the left side of midfield but granted total licence to roam with menace in attacking areas.

"Davies is a once in a generation player," said Herdman earlier this summer. "He's a special player.

Alphonso can make a difference in many roles: as a number ten, a winger, a wing-back and even up front. He's just got that ability. He has the speed, the power and is very intelligent. He is committed to his craft."

In the absence of the mercurial Davies, there would simply be no Canadian renaissance. Since making his full debut for the Canucks at the age of just 16, he has compiled numbers to die for: 12 goals in 32 appearances and an incredible 16 assists. In 13 World Cup 2022 qualifiers, he scored five times and created a further eight as the Canadians topped their qualifying table ahead of regional heavyweights United States and Mexico.

Now fully fit again after missing three months last season with a COVID-related heart condition, Davies – born to Liberian parents in a Ghanaian refugee camp before the family emigrated to Canada – is a young man with a social conscience. He is an ambassador for a United Nations foundation dealing with displaced people and has vowed to donate his earnings from the Qatar World Cup to charity.

MICHAEL ESTRADA

(Ecuador)
Ecuador's top scorer in World Cup qualification with six goals, notably on target in big wins over Uruguay and Colombia (4-2 and 6-1 respectively). A national teamer for the past five years, he currently plays his club football at Cruz Azul in Mexico, on loan from Toluca, having spent the first half of 2022 with DC United in MLS.

ANTHONY CONTRERAS

(Costa Rica)
Lively centre-forward, 22, whose youthful status stands in marked contrast to the many veterans in the Costa Rican camp. Came on very strong in the final rounds of qualification, scoring in a 2-1 win over El Salvador and the 2-0 victory at home to the USA. His recent national team emergence has surprised the vast majority of Costa Rican pundits.

HARRY KANE

(England)
In the spectacle-packed annals of World Cup finals, no marksman has ever claimed two Golden Boots, the award for the tournament's top scorer. The goal-hungry Germans Gerd Muller, Miroslav Klose and Thomas Muller all came tantalisingly close to this particular double. The Brazilian Ronaldo and Gary Lineker of England were not far away either. So what are the chances of England skipper Kane successfully defending his 2018 Golden Boot, when he amassed a six-goal haul in Russia?

Lightning may well strike twice for the Tottenham ace. He has the most enviable of international strike-rates (50 goals in his first 73 games), has scored ten goals in England's last two major tournaments (the 2018 World Cup and Euro 2020) and accumulated no fewer than 12 goals in qualification for Qatar. Only one other England hitman has proved more prolific – Wayne Rooney with 53 – and it would take a cataclysmic turn of events for Kane not to soon take sole possession of the top spot. Indeed, by the time you're reading this he may already have done.

Even when England are not firing on all cylinders offensively, Kane has that happy knack of surviving off scraps. Never one to be deterred, he makes the same clever off-the-ball runs in stoppage-time as he did in the first minute and always can be relied upon to locate pockets of space in the box. He is wily, full of endeavour and can hit the target every which way.

"He's our most important player, there's no doubt about that," gushed England manager Gareth Southgate last year. "You've only got to look at his goalscoring record with us to see his importance to the team. He's fundamental, not only with the goals he scores but the build-up play and everything else he brings."

Would the 29-year-old striker trade in all his goalscoring achievements and individual awards thus far, including three Premier League Golden Boots, for a World Cup title, the ultimate of team accolades? You bet he would.

PEDRI

(Spain)
After missing much of last season through injury, the Barcelona midfield tyro is now fit again, raring to showcase his prodigious skills and intelligence at his first World Cup. A smooth-as-silk schemer of perfect balance and co-ordination, he deservedly was voted Young Player of the Tournament at Euro 2020.

EDSON ALVAREZ

(Mexico)
A top quality holding midfielder, or occasional centre-back, the 24-year-old is known in his homeland as "The Machine". Now in his fourth season with Ajax, and quite possibly his last; Newcastle United failed in a bid to bring him to St James' Park in the summer, while Chelsea were also linked with him on deadline day.

JONAS HOFMANN

(Germany)
Certain players take their time coming to the boil, staying out of sight below the radar before peaking at a relatively advanced age. One such late-developer is the 30-year-old Borussia Monchengladbach utility man, who has emerged in the last 12 months as a performer of genuine international class.

Hofmann, who won his first full cap for Germany two years ago under Joachim Low, was subsequently included in his country's Euro 2020 squad, though did not play a single minute at the tournament, bedevilled by an ill-timed knee injury. Tough luck for the Gladbacher, who had been absolutely overjoyed on hearing that he had made the European Championship cut.

With Low giving way to Hansi Flick in the summer of 2021, Hofmann had a new *Bundestrainer* to lobby and what a fine job the former Hoffenheim and Dortmund pro has made of it, earning a regular spot in Flick's starting line-up. As Germany look to rebuild following the disastrous efforts of World Cup 2018 and Euro 2020, Hofmann has become one of the key building blocks in the new edifice, used throughout the World Cup qualifiers in a right-back slot, then successfully switching to the right wing in June's Nations League schedule. He has brought goals to the party too, on target in a pair of Nations League draws against England and Hungary. His last five games for Germany have brought three goals and two assists.

Hansi Flick certainly seems to appreciate him. The *Bundestrainer* describes him as a "super intelligent player" and recently made a point of guaranteeing Hofmann a starting role. "When you look at our last few games, then you have to say that he (Hofmann) already is settled in. He's established himself."

GUILLERMO OCHOA

(Mexico)
What is it about Mexico and World Cup longevity? Ochoa, 37, is in line to become the third Mexican international to go to five World Cups following legendary goalie Antonio Carbajal (1950-1966) and ex-skipper Rafael Marquez (2006-2018). *El Tri* skipper, Andres Guardado, will also add his name to the illustrious list.

CYLE LARIN

(Canada)
The Club Brugge striker is certainly a man for international scoring achievements, Canada's all-time leading marksman with 24 goals and the best finisher in CONCACAF World Cup qualifying (13 goals). Won a league-cup double in Turkey in 2020-21 with Besiktas before moving to Belgium this summer. Idolised Chelsea's Didier Drogba as a kid.

KARIM BENZEMA

(France)
For the best part of six long years, the Real Madrid super striker was deemed persona non grata by the powers-that-be at the French Football Federation, and it looked at times as though Benzema's exile from *Les Bleus* was permanent.

But in the end, with Benzema continuing to shine like a beacon at Real, France coach Didier Deschamps decided last year that he had served his penance, recalling him to the French squad for Euro 2020 – the forward's first international call-up since October 2015.

Not surprisingly for a player who has won five Champions League titles with Madrid, his return to the national team has worked out wonderfully. Ten goals in a little over a year is an excellent return and he also made a sizeable contribution to France's Nations League triumph in 2021, on the scoresheet in both the semi-final win over Belgium and victory in the final against Spain.

Nor has the 34-year-old only aided France with his finishing ability. He has added presence and know-how to the point of the French attack, worked hard across the line and proved altruistic in the extreme. He has not been a destabilising influence in the dressing room at all. "Benzema isn't merely a goalscorer," Deschamps told *beIN Sports*. "He constructs, he has a feel for the game."

In a recent interview with *So Foot* magazine, Deschamps insisted that he had no regrets about leaving Benzema out in the cold for so long. "This question makes no sense. It was the talks I had with him [in the spring of 2021] that convinced me to bring him back. Of course, he has evolved as a man. This was not about me. I made this decision for the good of the French national team. He might have returned to the fold sooner, but we did become world champions without him."

Benzema should have quite an appetite to make an impact in Qatar, having only appeared in one World Cup, way back in 2014 in Brazil, where he scored three goals in five appearances.

YASSER AL SHAHRANI

(Saudi Arabia)
Qatar 2022 will be the second World Cup finals for the quick-witted and disciplined left-back, who, capped over 60 times for the Green Falcons, sets the emotional tone. Uncompromising in the tackle and quick in covering mode, he made a major contribution to a rock-solid Saudi back-line during qualification.

SON HEUNG-MIN

(South Korea)
The South Korea skipper and joint-top scorer in last season's Premier League with 23 goals for Tottenham was not always a Spurs cult hero. In his early days, many club insiders thought his finishing was woeful. A recent inductee into the 100-cap club, he netted seven goals in World Cup 2022 qualifying and is now undoubtedly in the world-class bracket.

ACHRAF HAKIMI

(Morocco)
Morocco's authoritarian former coach Vahid Halilhodzic was tetchy, hot-headed and always ready to ditch those who did not meet his standards of professionalism. But he gave players that toed the line his full backing, and he most definitely had a lot of time for the ultra-adventurous Paris Saint-Germain right wing-back: "I couldn't possibly have a problem with Hakimi because it's a real pleasure to work with him," said Halilhodzic last year. "He adores everything tactical and he is among the best two or three players in his position in the world. He has all the qualities to rapidly become the leading right-sided wing-back on the planet. Physically, he's a monster. He has an exceptional physique, the body of an incredible athlete.

"He wants to be Morocco's penalty-taker. I told him the job is his, but only when he takes them for PSG ahead of Mbappe, Messi and Neymar."

New coach Walid Regragui likely holds Hakimi in the same high esteem, and the PSG flyer should be handed a starring role under the new manager.

At the age of 23, Hakimi has already lived a lifetime with the Atlas Lions. Just 16 when then-coach Herve Renard handed him his debut in a friendly against Canada in October 2016, the teenager was only a Real Madrid youth and B team player at the time. He already has 50-plus caps to his name.

Born in Madrid to Moroccan parents, Hakimi's career path reads like a who's who of the world's biggest clubs: an apprenticeship at Real Madrid followed by stints at Dortmund, Inter and PSG. "I've had the good fortune to play for big clubs," he told the *Jeune Afrique* daily. "Of course, I represent Morocco, but I also feel that I'm flying the flag for Africa as a whole. Many Africans identify with guys like me. Wherever they may be, they support me when I play for the national team. They show me affection, they encourage me and make me want to improve. That makes me very proud."

MEHDI TAREMI

(Iran)
Now in his third season leading the line for Portuguese big-hitters Porto, the 30-year-old Taremi seems to be improving with age. Responsible for seven Iranian goals in qualification, he finished runner-up in the Portuguese league's scoring rankings last term with 20 strikes – behind only Uruguay ace Darwin Nunez.

ALMOEZ ALI

(Qatar)
The Sudan-born striker was the hero of Qatar's triumph at the 2019 Asian Championship, netting an incredible nine goals, a haul which made him the best-ever marksman in a single edition of the competition. Thrice a Qatar champion with the Al Duhail club, he has also played in Austria (for LASK) and Spain (Cultural Leonesa).

EMILIANO MARTINEZ

(Argentina)
La Albiceleste are likely to be extremely confident in the event of a penalty shootout in Qatar. After all, in Martinez, they have a specialist "penalty killer", someone who pulled off a hat-trick of spot-kick saves in Argentina's victory over Colombia in the semi-final of the 2021 Copa America.

The key to Martinez's successful approach to penalties – and he has proved it in the Premier League with Aston Villa too – is his mastery of mind games. He knows exactly how to pile pressure on the kicker with his non-stop chat, and his verbal assault on Colombia's Yerry Mina at the last Copa America has gone down in Argentine football folklore: "Hey, look, I know where you'll shoot and I'll save it. I'm eating you up, brother, I'm eating you up, brother." Needless to say, Martinez dived the right way and blocked Mina's effort.

Argentina's triumph at the Copa America, their first title in 28 years, was a belated coming of age party for 30-year-old Martinez. Only inducted into the full international set-up a few weeks previously, he gave a masterclass in the South American championship, cool and commanding, brilliant in his shot-stopping and racking up four clean sheets in seven outings. Deservedly voted Goalkeeper of the Tournament, he's now a fully-fledged national hero in Argentina.

As his penalty kick trash-talking indicates, Martinez also is good for a quote and recently made a fierce defence of the standard of football in his home continent, responding to claims by French star Kylian Mbappe that Brazil and Argentina had it easy in all-South American matches. "I agree with Fabinho [Liverpool's Brazilian midfielder] when he said that Brazil and Argentina would finish on top of their groups if they were to play qualifiers against European countries. We have to deal with the altitude in La Paz in Bolivia, temperatures of 30 degrees in Ecuador, while in Colombia you cannot breathe. The Europeans have perfect pitches. They don't know what it's like to play and travel in South America."

VITINHA

(Portugal)
Every World Cup throws up last-minute revelations, little-known international novices, or rookies who grab their opportunity with both hands. Young Paris Saint-Germain central midfielder Vitinha, a new kid on the Parc des Princes block this season, could be one such sensation.

Since swapping Porto for PSG this summer in a €40 million deal, the 22-year-old has hit the ground running, forging an excellent midfield partnership with Italian maestro Marco Verratti and catching the eye with his technical quality and ability to organise the play. He has a terrific passing range, always looks to play positively, has the sharpness of mind and execution to beat a high press and bites surprisingly hard into the tackle for a player of his diminutive build. He is mobile, versatile and tactically aware. Only in one area has he looked fallible, picking up too many yellow cards.

On the evidence of what he has shown thus far for PSG, he could certainly do a job for Portugal at the heart of the engine room, particularly with other candidates appearing to lose momentum. Long-serving midfield icon Joao Moutinho is perhaps a little too long in the tooth, while his Wolverhampton Wanderers team-mate Ruben Neves has, to date, tended to blow hot and cold for the national team.

Will Portugal boss Fernando Santos be brave enough to select Vitinha? Santos is a true conservative and probably looks on the likes of Vitinha as one for the future. He only gave the youngster his first cap in March (in the World Cup play-off against North Macedonia) and to date has restricted him to just one start, a UEFA Nations League tie against Switzerland in June.

Vitinha knows all about the vicissitudes of life as a top-flight pro. He flopped during a spell on loan at Wolves in 2020-21 and then had to fight to rekindle his career, playing superbly for Porto last term.

KIM JIN-GYU

(South Korea)
The much-improved 25-year-old schemer proved an instant hit on breaking into the national team this year, scoring in each of his first two outings against Iceland and Moldova. No South Korean player has achieved such a feat in 17 years. He's taken the next step in his club career too, joining champions Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors in March.

JOSEPH AIDOO

(Ghana)
The 26-year-old Celta Vigo stopper is as combative on the field of play as he is quietly-spoken and timid off it. Now in his fourth season at Celta after moving from Belgian side Genk in 2019. A childhood fan of the Bayern Munich and Ghana central defender Sammy Kuffour, he aspires to play for the Bavarians one day.

AMADOU ONANA

(Belgium)
One of the new faces in the *Diables Rouge* squad for the June sequence of UEFA Nations League games (making his debut in the unfortunate 4-1 home defeat to Benelux rivals Netherlands), the highly-rated and versatile 21-year-old midfielder will be hoping that a recent, big-money move to the Premier League will help boost his chances of remaining in the World Cup plans of Belgium coach Roberto Martinez.

Onana swapped Ligue 1 Lille for Everton this summer in a transaction worth up to €40m (after West Ham United had also agreed a fee for him), and such a fee brings with it a marked increase in expectations. But if any youngster can live with the pressure, it's the grounded Senegal-born youngster. He boasts maturity beyond his years and clearly picked up good habits during formative spells in Germany with Hoffenheim and Hamburg.

Those in the know in Belgium consider Onana the heir apparent to long-serving national team midfield anchorman Axel Witsel and the comparison is more than a valid one. What makes him special, however, are the other strings to his bow: equally proficient as a box-to-box midfielder or at centre-back. He already has Champions League experience as well – appearing in all eight of Lille's games last term – and has looked the part skippering Belgium's Under-21s.

"Playing for the full Belgium side has been my goal for a long time," the Toffees new boy told Belgian state broadcaster *RTBF* in May. "Like any youngster, I'm really proud to have reached this level. Now for the hard part – staying in the squad. I'm going to do all I can to retain my place. This group of Belgian players has extraordinary qualities. For the next generation of national teamers like me, we have the challenge to at least do as well."

DYLAN BRONN

(Tunisia)
French-born central defender with a flair for scoring goals from set-pieces. He scored in Tunisia's 5-2 loss to Belgium at the last World Cup – a bitter-sweet memory for him, as he had to be substituted because of a knee injury just five minutes later. Describes himself as a "psychopath" in trying to keep clean sheets.

NAMPALYS MENDY

(Senegal)
Dynamic defensive midfielder often compared to the ex-Chelsea, Real Madrid and France holder Claude Makelele. Born and brought up on the Provence coast but of Senegalese descent, he played a vital role in his country's African title this year and was rightly included in the Team of the Tournament.

PEDRO

(Brazil)
Could *Selecao* coach Tite hand an out-of-the-blue World Cup wild card to the 25-year-old Flamengo centre-forward? Stranger things have happened. With 12 goals in his first 12 Copa Libertadores matches this season (including four strikes against Deportes Tolima and a simply stunning semi-final hat-trick against Velez Sarsfield), Pedro has received media plaudits galore of late, a view apparently shared by the admiring Tite. "I'm not going to evade the question," declared Tite in an interview with *Radio Globo*. "Pedro has special characteristics which are very useful when you are facing teams who sit deep in defence. He could be an option with his penalty-box style of play. Around 80 per cent of my squad is already decided. Great footballers put themselves forward."

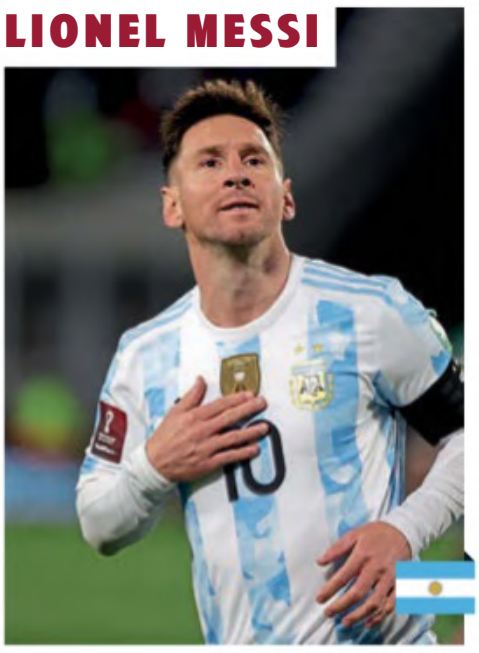
Looking for more variety in his attacking personnel, Tite already has a surfeit of mobile, quick frontrunners who attack space with gusto and skilfully combine in build-up play. Pedro is a totally different type:

a red-zone poacher, a man to get on the end of crosses and through balls. Pedro is just a natural-born goalscorer. Take the spectacular bicycle-kick goal he recently thumped home in a Brazil Cup victory over Athletico Paranaense. A dazzling piece of high-wire skill.

All credit to Flamengo coach Dorival for opting recently to switch to a two-man front-line, with Pedro lurking in the box and Gabriel Barbosa wandering dangerously between the lines causing havoc.

Pedro, who made his senior debut for Brazil in a World Cup qualifier against Venezuela in November 2020, has had his ups and downs in his career. As a rising star with Fluminense in Rio, he was once linked with Real Madrid, only for a knee injury to scupper the dream move. In September 2019, Fiorentina paid €11m for his services, but his face never fitted at the Sadio Artemio Franchi, with just four substitute appearances in 12 months. Happy to cut his losses, he headed back to Brazil early in 2020 to play for boyhood favourites Flamengo. He's been a man revived ever since.

LIONEL MESSI



(Argentina)
After losing four major tournament finals with Argentina, the little attacking genius at long last became a national team victor last year, skippering *La Albiceleste* to gold at the Copa America. Should he play seven games at Qatar 2022, he will take over from Germany's Lothar Matthaus as the player with the most World Cup appearances, currently set at 25.

DARWIN NUNEZ

(Uruguay)
With Uruguay's veteran strike partnership of Edinson Cavani and Luis Suarez inevitably showing signs of wear and tear, expect Liverpool's newly-arrived *goleador* to have more and more game time. After only three starts in World Cup qualification and repeated international call-offs with knee trouble, he needs a run of games to prove he can fill their boots.

BRENDEN AARONSON

(USA)
On discovering that the young midfielder had opted to leave Red Bull Salzburg this summer for Leeds United, several pundits in the US questioned the wisdom of the 21-year-old's decision. Some thought he would be bogged down in a relegation scrap with Leeds. Others wondered why he was changing horses with a World Cup just months away. Another group believed he would regret passing on guaranteed Champions League football.

So much for the sceptics, who now are busy running for cover. Fearless, confident and relentlessly pro-active, the New Jersey native has taken to the Premier League like a duck to water, catching the eye with goals, prodigious work-rate and slick creativity. He appears to be the complete package, blessed with a great touch, tremendous passing and vision, stupendous ability on the half-turn and superb movement off the ball. He will run and press till he drops and is very adaptable, equally at home as a number ten or on either flank. Leeds, who only had to splash out £29.5m for him, seem to have a candidate for bargain of the season.

Premier League watchers will be rather surprised that he has yet to fully establish himself as an automatic starter for the US. In his 20-odd caps, almost half have been as a substitute. US coach Gregg Berhalter is spoilt for choice in final-third options. As a winger, Aaronson faces competition from the likes of Gio Reyna, Timothy Weah and Christian Pulisic; in attacking midfield, he must see off the likes of Yunus Musah, Weston McKennie and Luca de la Torre. Much of his difficulties with the national team stem from his flexibility – his exact role in Berhalter's side is still to be defined. He is still waiting to carve out a niche for himself, but it's high time a decision was made.

Now the second-most expensive American player of all time, Aaronson has everything to play for in the Premier League this autumn. Should he continue to impress for Leeds, Berhalter will simply have to find room for his industry, assists and speed on the counter.

RAPHINHA

(Brazil)
Long ignored by *Selecao* bosses, the dashing and decisive Barcelona winger made quite an impact on finally receiving his call-up papers last year, setting up two goals on his debut in a 3-1 World Cup qualifying win in Venezuela. A week later, he performed even better, scoring a brace in a 4-1 home thrashing of Uruguay in Manaus.

ANDREAS SKOV OLSEN

(Denmark)
Following just a bit-part role in Denmark's surprisingly impressive showing at Euro 2020, the right-sided winger has now established himself as an integral part of the Danes' starting XI. A mazy dribbler, a maker of intelligent inside runs and very accurate in his shooting, the Club Brugge ace represents a large proportion of Denmark's attacking penetration.

KIEFFER MOORE

(Wales)
Some would call the bustling, steak-tough 6ft 5in target man a blunt instrument. Others would uncharitably label him a throwback or dinosaur. But whatever the disparaging remarks, there is no getting away from the fact that the presence of the Bournemouth striker is a major plus for Wales. His old-school methods: his aerial ability, physical strength and total commitment make him the most awkward of customers. While he does the heavy lifting, Wales' more technical star turns – Gareth Bale, Aaron Ramsey and Brennan Johnson – help provide the attacking third finery.

Not that Moore is just the disruptive "big man" up front, the spearhead who supplies the flick-ons, occupies defenders and creates space for others to run into. He has a decent touch on the ball, is adept in his link-up play and is a willing runner. He is a valuable cog in the machine of coach Rob Page.

Now 30, Moore arrived late on the international scene, making his debut for Wales in September 2019 in a friendly against Belarus. These past three years, he has constantly proved his worth to Wales: an ever-present in the side which reached the last 16 of Euro 2020 – heading the equaliser in a draw with Switzerland in the group phase – scoring twice in the World Cup 2022 qualifiers and was at his hard-working and selfless best in the play-off final victory over Ukraine in Cardiff.

An intense competitor, he plays as though every game is his last. And it's not hard to understand why. Most of his career has been a struggle against the odds, with Moore still playing non-league football for Forest Green Rovers as recently as 2017. For the most part, his sporting life has been that of the typical journeymen, combining a spell with Norwegian outfit Viking of Stavanger with various stints in England's League One and Championship (Ipswich, Rotherham, Barnsley, Wigan and Cardiff). Helped Bournemouth win promotion to the Premier League last season.

FILIP KOSTIC

(Serbia)
Little wonder Juventus were so happy to sign the left-sided winger this summer from Eintracht Frankfurt. Kostic, 29, has long been one of Europe's most underrated attacking-third performers. As diligent and industrious as he is technically assured and creative, he was the heartbeat of Frankfurt's Europa League triumph last season.

ROBERT LEWANDOWSKI

(Poland)
For all his goalscoring exploits at club level and fine international strike-rate (76 goals in his first 132 caps for Poland), Lewandowski has yet to find the back of the net at a World Cup. At Russia 2018, his only finals to date, he drew a blank in all three of his country's matches. This is last-chance saloon time for Barca's 34-year-old.

PABLO SARABIA

(Spain)
It would be something of an understatement to point out that Spain coach Luis Enrique is a big admirer of the Paris Saint-Germain winger. Last season, Sarabia, 30, was the only Spanish international to take part in every one of Spain's 13 fixtures, underlining his value to the team with six goals in World Cup qualifiers, UEFA Nations League ties and friendlies. In 2021-22, he was very much Spain's lucky charm – whenever he scored, *La Roja* won.

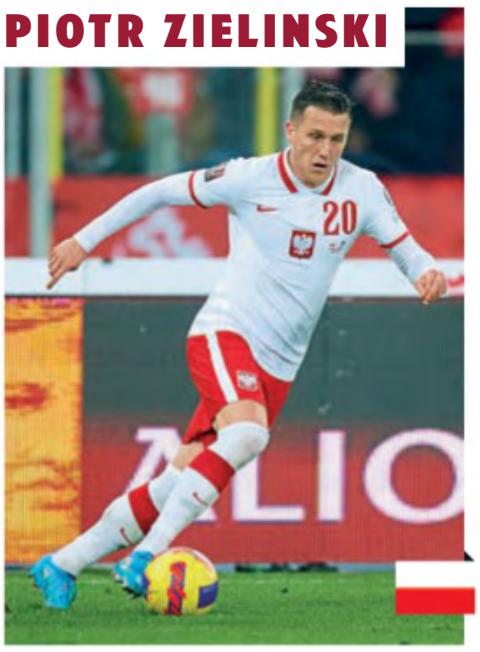
The lively, versatile Madrid-born attacker – who is comfortable playing on either flank – is the typical unsung hero, the sort of player who is rarely the subject of media superlatives. Luis Enrique, though, swears by him. Only once in the last 15 months has the former Barcelona coach not used him, omitting him from the matchday list only for the excruciating penalty shootout defeat to Italy in the Euro 2020 semi-finals. He is just the sort of player that Luis Enrique likes: full of energy, tenacious, hard-working and consistent.

"I'm in the best moment of my career," Sarabia declared at a national team press conference earlier this summer. "Every day, I am improving. I've built up a lot of experience and I'm really enjoying my football. For me, the mental side of things stands for 70 per cent of a player's performances. I'm very happy in myself and am responding to the confidence which is being shown in me."

Sarabia has only been a national teamer for the past three years, winning his first cap under caretaker boss Robert Moreno in September 2019. Prior to that point, he had been overlooked, even drawing a blank when shining for Sevilla in an excellent three-season stint at the Sanchez Pizjuan between 2016 and 2019.

Under contract to PSG until 2024, he spent last season in Lisbon on loan at Sporting, where he racked up 22 goals and nine assists in all comps. Back in Paris now, and among a star-studded squad, he'll need to get those all-important playing minutes under his belt to ensure he remains at the forefront of Luis Enrique's mind.

PIOTR ZIELINSKI



(Poland)
Part of the Polish national team for almost a decade, the Napoli midfielder, 28, has a reputation in his homeland for reserving his best performances for his club. He undoubtedly has the attributes to shine in Qatar: tremendous skill on the ball, defence-splitting passes and the ability to control the tempo of games.

LUKA MODRIC

(Croatia)
Still playing with the enthusiasm and hunger of a rookie, the 37-year-old Real Madrid maestro will star at his eighth major international tournament in Qatar (four World Cups and four European Championships). According to reports in Spain, Croatia's captain intends to announce his national team retirement at the end of the year.

RONALD ARAUJO

(Uruguay)
Equally solid in central defence or at right-back, the 23-year-old Barcelona starlet has every chance of making a huge impact in Qatar. Not for nothing is he often cited as a future captain of Uruguay, and how apt it was in March when Diego Godin, the current wearer of the *Celeste* armband, hailed Araujo's performance in Barca's 4-0 *Clasico* win over Real Madrid, a game in which he not only headed home a goal but neutralised Real winger Vinicius Jr.

"[Araujo] is in great form right now," said Godin. "He did a fine marking job on one of the best forwards in world football. He gives great security to a defence. He can stand up to players who are skilful and quick."

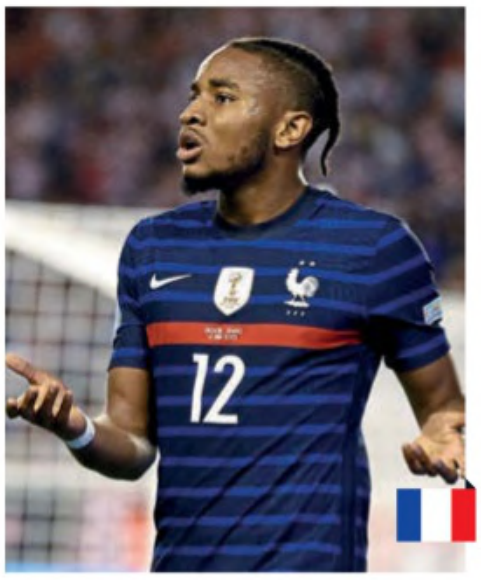
Araujo, who joined Barcelona from Uruguayan side Boston River in August 2018, will, in the not-too-distant future, exclusively line up in central defence for his country. But, for now, Uruguay boss Diego Alonso is happy to shore up the heart of his back-line with the veteran combo of Godin alongside Sebastian Coates or Jose Gimenez. Araujo will only play centrally if one of the first-choice pairing is injured.

The young Uruguayan was an immediate hit on breaking into the Barcelona first-team in the 2020-21 season. Mature, powerful and always aware of danger, he swiftly constructed a reputation for being extremely difficult to outsmart in a dribbling one-on-one. Another of his strongest assets is his clean tackling, anticipation and the precision of his interventions. Only rarely does he resort to foul play.

As Barca coach Xavi rightly points out, Araujo has also made great strides on a technical level. He is much more comfortable on the ball than he used to be and his distribution – in particular his long diagonal passes – have improved no end.

Arguably Barca's best value-for-money signing in recent times, Araujo literally was recruited for a song: a fee of just £1.7m plus £3.5m in variables. His current market value is thought to have increased at least tenfold.

CHRISTOPHER NKUNKU



(France)
Coming off the back of an outstanding 2021-22 season in the Bundesliga with RB Leipzig – 35 goals and 20 assists in all competitions – the Paris-born second striker is making a compelling case to be a regular starter for *Les Bleus*. A unique mixture of blazing acceleration, brilliant technique, finishing expertise and selflessness.

YANN SOMMER

(Switzerland)
A confirmed foodie and spare-time chef, the Borussia Monchengladbach keeper will be aiming to rustle up a tasty dish for the Swiss at the FIFA extravaganza. Renowned as a real penalty-saving expert, he was a cornerstone of his nation's fine defensive effort in qualification, only conceding twice in eight games. Excellent at the 2020 Euros.

NOA LANG

(Netherlands)
Outspoken, cocky and stubbornly free spirited, the extravagantly-gifted Club Brugge winger would seem to be everything that dictatorial *Oranje* head coach Louis van Gaal hates in a footballer – but no. Always the contrarian, Van Gaal seems to have taken the swaggering 23-year-old to his heart, awarding him his first senior cap last autumn and duly sticking with him.

Lang, who opened his goalscoring account for the Netherlands in a 3-2 UEFA Nations League victory over Wales in June, is the sort of intuitive forward LVG desperately needs. Going forward, the Dutch can lack a degree of imagination and, whether starting or used as an impact substitute, Lang has all the equipment to pick the lock, to cut a swathe through a back-line.

You have to accept Lang as he is though – foibles and all. Trouble and controversy invariably seems to find him. While at the Feyenoord academy, he sparked acrimony aplenty by openly declaring himself to be a supporter of arch-rivals Ajax. Then, when he was granted his dream move to Amsterdam at the age of 15, he could never stay on the straight and narrow, accused by his coaches of playing to the gallery and not respecting his team-mates.

He appeared in a dozen or so games for the Ajax first team in the 2018-19 and 2019-20 seasons, notably hitting a hat-trick against Twente in December 2019. Sadly for him, he could not keep his nose clean and, after clashing on the touchline with then-Ajax coach Erik ten Hag, his days at the Amsterdam Arena were effectively numbered. Subsequently sent on loan to Twente and Club Brugge, Lang performed especially well for the latter and joined them permanently last year. Attributes his success at Club Brugge to a greater amount of tactical freedom in Flanders compared to when he was in the Dutch capital.

JUDE BELLINGHAM

(England)
It would be no surprise at all if the Dortmund midfielder were to prove himself as a vital member of the Three Lions' starting XI in Qatar. The 19-year-old can do it all in the middle of the park: press effectively, win the ball, pick out a pass, drive forward and create. Amazing that he is already in his third season in Dortmund's first team.

THIBAUT COURTOIS

(Belgium)
One of the world's top goalkeepers, the Real Madrid custodian was not at all happy after France beat the Belgians at the semi-final stage of the last World Cup, dubbing the French approach as "anti-football". Courtois, proud and prickly, likes to use grievance as a motivational tool and will no doubt be suitably energised for the Qatar challenge.

DJIBRIL SOW

(Switzerland)
After playing a prominent role in Eintracht Frankfurt's shock Europa League triumph last season – even scoring a rare goal en route to the tense final against Rangers in Seville – the all-action central midfielder has turned his attention to another major career objective: making a success of his first taste of a World Cup. Despite breaking into the *Nati* fold back in 2017, Sow did not make the Swiss cut for the following year's World Cup finals in Russia. Four years and 30 caps later, he feels he has a point to prove.

Long thought of as a timid, quiet and reserved member of the Switzerland set-up, a good player rather than an indispensable one, Sow admits that European success with Frankfurt brings with it added responsibility in the national team. As the 25-year-old correctly points out himself, he is now one of a select band of Swiss internationals: "Xherdan Shaqiri (who won the Champions League with Liverpool in 2018-19) and myself are the only players in the current squad who've won a European trophy."

Zurich-born with Senegalese roots, Sow is enjoying the time of his life at the moment. Not only does he have a World Cup to look forward to, he also will be playing in this season's Champions League group phase. Another first for him, and reward for last season's memorable Europa League triumph.

Previously on the books of FC Zurich, Borussia Monchengladbach and Young Boys of Berne, Sow is rated among the top five defensive midfielders in the Bundesliga. Indeed, he is one of the most important figures in the Eintracht side, combining ball-winning ability, marathon man energy levels and fine distribution. Switzerland boss Murat Yakin will be especially keen for him to showcase his tempo-controlling skills and accurate long passes in Qatar, although he has tough competition with Granit Xhaka, Remo Freuler and Denis Zakaria also vying for starting spots in midfield.

He is yet to score for Switzerland too. An ice-breaker at World Cup 2022 would be most welcome.

YUNUS MUSAH

(USA)
No United States player has improved as much in recent times as the bright and exuberant Valencia teenager. Once at the Arsenal academy, he is happy both as a midfielder or on the wing. Despite his tender age, the native New Yorker already has accumulated 19 senior caps. Represented England at junior level.

GARETH BALE

(Wales)
Would anyone be surprised if the LAFC forward marked Wales' first World Cup since 1958 with a stunning goal or two? A chance maker, goalscorer and talismanic leader, Bale has proved his worth to Wales over and over. Always impressive on the big occasion, the 33-year-old was outstanding as Rob Page's side overcame Austria and Ukraine in the play-offs.

BRYAN MBEUMO

(Cameroon)
The Indomitable Lions received a tremendous shot in the arm recently when the stocky, in-form Brentford forward switched his international allegiance from France to Cameroon. Mbeumo, 23, was born in Avallon in central France and represented *Les Bleus* at U17, U20 and U21 level, but is eligible for the West African nation through his father.

Mbeumo, who joined Brentford from French outfit Troyes in 2019, has steadily grown in influence and reputation in the UK. There exists a substantial gulf in class between England's second tier and the Premier League, but Mbeumo has made that transition look ridiculously easy; expressive and menacing with his brilliant left foot, deadly accurate with his final ball, quick to dart into goalscoring positions and very hard-working.

With his pace, deft touch and directness, Cameroon will be opening up another significant supply line for strikers Vincent Aboubakar, Karl Toko Ekambi and Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting.

Top marks in this case to Cameroon federation chief Samuel Eto'o. The former Barcelona and Inter striker is believed to have led the negotiations with Mbeumo personally. Cameroon insiders suggest that the Brentford star had been a target for the West African nation for quite some time.

Rather strangely, though, the news of Mbeumo's nationality volte-face was not universally welcomed by all of Cameroon's sports media, with some saying he's not of the quality of an Mbappe or a Tchouameni – players whom he likely would have crossed paths with at French youth level.

But Mbeumo remains undeterred. He tweeted: "Can't wait to start this new adventure" after announcing his switch of international allegiance, and so he should be excited. With a World Cup group consisting of Brazil, Serbia and Switzerland, the Cameroonians will be targetting a place in the knockout stages and a potential repeat of their Italia '90 heroics.

If Mbeumo can be a part of that, he may get the chance to add his name to the likes of Roger Milla and Papa Bouba Diop who have gone down in African World Cup folklore.

LUKA SUCIC

(Croatia)
Despite only a handful of cameo appearances for Croatia's senior team, the 20-year-old Red Bull Salzburg midfielder looks a star in the making. In each of the last two seasons, he has turned on the style for his club on either side of a midfield diamond, but has begun this term in a playmaking role. He's an imaginative free-spirit with lots of goalscoring menace.

Sucic could be useful to Croatia in several ways this winter. Either in a starting role as a freewheeling midfielder on either flank, or as an impact substitute. Up against tiring defenders, his ability to effortlessly glide past markers and his outstanding shooting technique may well prove a trump card for coach Zlatko Dalic. He could feature too as a replacement for veteran orchestra conductor Luka Modric. Should the latter need a breather in the Qatar heat, Sucic has all the skills and vision to step in seamlessly.

ANDREW REDMAYNE

(Australia)
The larger-than-life Sydney FC custodian became a social media phenomenon in June for his penalty-shootout dance moves in the Socceroos' World Cup play-off victory over Peru. Redmayne, specifically subbed on to take the place of Mat Ryan for the all-important spot-kicks, promptly began his distraction shtick, wiggling and waving his arms, spinning around on his line. Sufficiently nonplussed by his antics, the Peruvians duly missed two of their kicks, one smashed against the post, the other pushed away by Redmayne.

"We always knew we had Redmayne up our sleeve," explained Australia's goalkeeper coach John Crawley to *ABC*. "We planned for that. I think you just have to do something different to disrupt the penalty taker's routine. They'd played against Maty [Ryan] for the whole game and knew what he was about. So when they saw Redmayne coming on, they maybe thought: 'Who's this guy?'"

It was not the first time bearded wonder Redmayne had turned his goal line into a dance floor. He put on the same act in the 2019 A-League Grand Final, saving two kicks as Sydney FC saw off Perth Glory.

The ex-Melbourne City and Western Sydney Wanderers goalie knows full well that the chances of a remake in Qatar are not great. Australia face a big challenge in Group D – drawn with France, Denmark and Tunisia – so their chances of facing another shootout are slim. Claiming a starting spot will be tricky; maybe even making the squad will be tough – No.1 Ryan, perhaps a little rusty having spent much of last term on the Real Sociedad bench, is now a regular at Copenhagen; Danny Vukovic is second choice; and the outstanding Mitchell Langerak has just returned and could even claim the gloves. But don't write off Redders just yet.

FRENKIE DE JONG

(Netherlands)
Oranje coach Louis van Gaal, like most football-watchers in this part of the world, knows exactly how to bring the best out of young Frenkie de Jong. And that means using him in his best position: as one-half of a midfield double pivot, a deep-lying role in which he is the first to receive the ball from defenders, giving him all the scope he needs to initiate attacking moves.

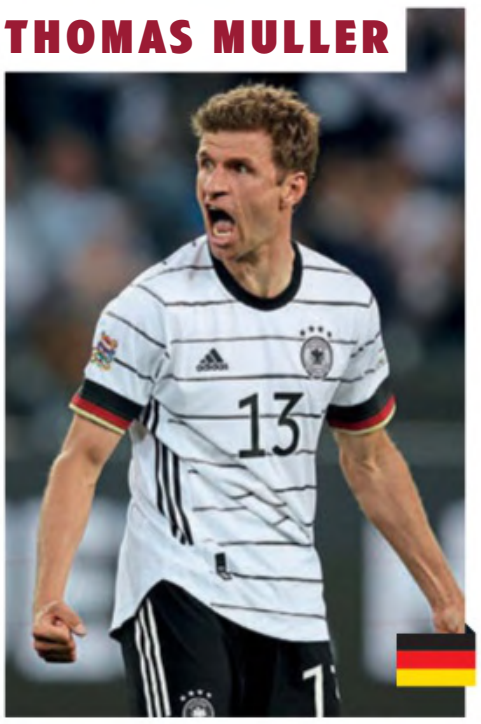
A Gulf adventure this winter should be just what the doctor ordered for the ex-Ajax orchestrator. The Dutchman found himself the main character in an unsettling soap opera in the latest transfer window, heavily linked with Manchester United and Chelsea, but refusing to budge. Barca, it seems, no longer see him as a vital cog in the *Blaugrana* machine, an attitude a world away from the high esteem Van Gaal and his *Oranje* team-mates hold him.

Part of a strong spine, alongside captain Virgil van Dijk and attacker Memphis Depay, if De Jong shines in Qatar, the Netherlands have every chance of repeating their exploits of 2010 and 2014 when they finished runners-up and third respectively.

MATHEUS NUNES

(Portugal)
Although still of limited international experience – he has yet to reach double-figures in the full cap count – the Brazil-born midfielder must be in with a chance of a centre-stage brief in Qatar. Nunes, who recently signed for Wolves from Lisbon giants Sporting, is an exceptional all-round operator, skilful, full-of running and a genuine class act at turning defence into attack.

THOMAS MULLER



(Germany)
The 33-year-old Bayern Munich attacking midfielder has always been the most conscientious of team men, but even he will be aware that a few goals in Qatar could earn him a place in the World Cup record books. He has ten goals in three tournaments to date – just two fewer than a certain Pele in fifth, and six short of former team-mate Miroslav Klose's all-time record.

REO HATATE

(Japan)
This gifted midfielder may be new to the international arena – only making his debut for the Samurai Blue in their final World Cup qualifier, a 1-1 draw with Vietnam, in March – but he is unquestionably a real talent, a multi-dimensional player who can set the tempo, drive into advanced areas and pick out a killer pass. Always looking for the ball and full of ideas, fizz and pressing intensity, the 24-year-old oozes competitiveness and looks tailor-made for the all-or-nothing pressure cooker of a World Cup finals.

He made an instant impact on joining current Scottish champions Celtic from Kawasaki Frontale for a mere £1.3m midway through last season. In his first game for the Bhoys, he put in an eye-catching man-of-the-match performance against Hibernian and the following week fired an unstoppable long-range effort into the Hearts net. Just a fortnight later, he struck twice as Celtic inflicted a 3-0 thrashing on Glasgow arch-rivals Rangers.

Hatate has the ability, vision and character to run the midfield show, and Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu must be tempted to give him more opportunities. In the heat of Qatar, the Celtic man's knack for sudden bursts of energy, for explosively breaking the lines, could prove quite a weapon.

His versatility and immensely hard-working nature is also a major plus point for the East Asian nation. While the youngster probably is at his best floating free in the midfield – usually in the inside-left area – he also has plenty of experience at left-back, on the left wing and in a holding midfield role. Though a right-footer, he very much prefers the inverted route.

He already has accumulated a great deal of representative football experience, featuring for the Japanese University XI and his country's youth teams, notably showing up well at the famous Toulon Tournament in 2019 where Japan got to the final, and the 2020 Olympics, held on home soil, where they progressed to the semi-finals before losing narrowly to Spain.

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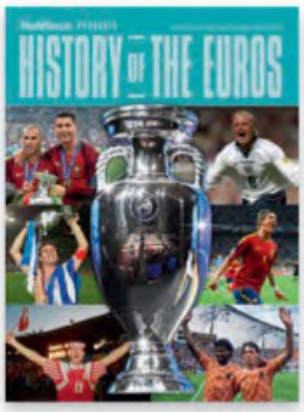

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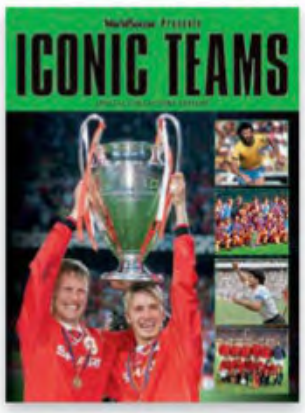

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TIM CAHILL

"That first World Cup created my legacy"

Australia legend Tim Cahill sits down with *World Soccer* to discuss his playing career, the Aspire Academy and the upcoming 2022 World Cup

How is life in Qatar and how much have you been enjoying it out there?
It is really busy. I have been working here for three years at the Aspire Academy across all different sports – not just football. It is something I have embraced since retiring. I went through the processes of getting my UEFA coaching licences, and studying for diplomas and management courses to better myself academically. It has been a long journey working with FIFA, the footballing federations and assisting domestic club teams as well. I still have a relationship with Everton too, and now we are closing in on the greatest show on Earth.

Tell us a little bit more about your role at the Aspire Academy.
I work across all sports, so we have different departments such as squash, table tennis, athletics and swimming, and then specialised projects too, whether that is helping with training camps or coaching staff. I'm currently working on a project with Sri Lanka to run their national team and I set up training camps in Qatar, set up the methodology, the data to get the players tested then help with games too. There is plenty that keeps me busy.

We heard you speaking bits of Arabic during the World Cup draw in April. How do you find the culture over there?
The culture is not something new to me. I have been playing in the Asian continent for over a decade, travelling across all of the Middle East and playing in pretty much all those countries. The nicest thing about my journey is that I played in England, America, China and India. Culture is very important to me because my mother is from Samoa. When you go to other countries, firstly you respect the language, then the religion, the people and their food. It has been great for me to be able to adjust easily. I really enjoy my lifestyle, it is very peaceful and I work in a place where I can have a different view on football, and the way they operate really helps me accelerate my education and learning.

Which country has been your favourite to live in?
China was amazing because of how big the cities were; in Shanghai the old and the new are all in one. New York was totally off the chain – it is one of our favourites because we went from England to the Big Apple, the city of Four Seasons. India really levelled me at the back end of my career. I really appreciated the spiritual side of football more, the meditation, and I am really close to Sadhguru who came over to Everton back in the day. Now Qatar is peace and quiet. I really enjoy just being in a world where I can go to the office, come home and chill out with the family, then fly to England and other parts of Europe, Australia and Africa for different football projects. They all have their own flavour and are all different.

Tell us about what you have seen from the Qatar national team and how you think they will do in the tournament?
Qatar won the Asian Cup in 2019. That is very difficult to do for a country where the population that you have available to select from is around three million. When you look at the talent pool and the numbers, to win the Asian Cup is incredible. Compare that with Australia who have over 25 million people, yet have only won it once.

Qatar now have a standalone game for the opening day of the tournament and that will be amazing for the supporters. How they will perform is difficult to say but they have a great squad, have prepared really well having been in camp for six months, and I look forward to watching them showcase what they have on and off the pitch.

Which players from the Qatar national team should supporters watch out for?
If you look at the starting line-up then Akram Afif is very clear, he can create something out of nothing. Then there is Almoez Ali as well and Hassan Al-Haydos. Qatar have a really good team but it is about the depth in the squad which will be tested. They have players who can handle the pressure and occasion. ➤

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Stunner...Cahill's wonder volley against Netherlands in 2014 was one of the goals of the tournament

Can you describe the experience of playing in a World Cup? Is it the pinnacle of a player's career?
For me, coming from Australia and playing in four World Cups, yes. The hardest thing is getting to a World Cup and the second hardest is getting picked for the squad. On top of that you have to get selected to walk on the pitch. For me, singing the national anthem is very emotional, that is when everything kicks in and your body feels like it's in quicksand. You think: "Wow I am here and now I need to show what I have". Once the whistle blows, everything switches off and the next thing is to win, to score and try doing something special. It definitely is the pinnacle for me.

You were the first Australian to ever score in a World Cup. How significant would it be for the Qatari player that manages to achieve that?
I was asked in an interview: "What would success be for Qatar?" Success is winning a game, getting your first points and then finding your first goalscorer in a World Cup. I didn't realise the impact that I would have, over a decade later and even in retirement. I didn't know what was happening at the time because all I wanted to do was play football. That first World Cup created my legacy and is the footprint of why I am here today as a retired athlete and still involved in the football world. For Qatar, there are so many elements that are important but they have to be competitive.

Australia struggled to get to the tournament and are in a very tough group with France, Denmark and Tunisia. How will they get on?
There was a point where Australia looked

History-maker...Cahill celebrates scoring against Japan back in 2006, Australia's first-ever World Cup goal

In Qatar...Cahill battles against Qatari defenders in Doha in 2014

like they weren't going to qualify so, after getting through the play-offs, they are happy just to be there. For Australia to qualify for the World Cup is a massive achievement in terms of impact on the country. We host the Women's World Cup next year, too. If you don't qualify then you are just a passenger. Now you are in the hat to play the best teams in the world and you never know what could happen.

Which country are you tipping to win the World Cup?
I have been pretty consistent and I feel England have an outside chance. With their preparations, the timing of the tournament and being only seven hours away from Qatar, players will have got going into their rhythm such as Harry Kane and Phil Foden. It will take them seven games to win the World Cup and the advantage is definitely for the teams that are close by. Everyone will say Brazil, France, Germany and Argentina will be in the reckoning too.

"I have been pretty consistent and I feel England have an outside chance [of winning the World Cup]"

World Cup draw... Cahill speaks on stage during the 2022 group-stage draw

And finally, who do you think will be the star player of the tournament?
You have to look at the PSG guys in Kylian Mbappe and Neymar. You are looking for the goalscorers and ones who can create memorable moments. Mbappe is in amazing form and, with that midfield and front line alongside him, he is someone that will score a lot of goals in this World Cup.

Interview by Shamoon Hafez

FELIX'S FAIRY TALE

In little over a year, Felix Afena-Gyan has gone from playing amateur footballer in Ghana to lifting a major European club title

Words: Emmanuel Ayamga

Football has a way of creating heroes out of dire situations, and one such moment materialised at the Stadio Luigi Ferraris when Genoa hosted Roma in November 2021 – on a night that belonged to Ghanaian prodigy Felix Afena-Gyan.

Jose Mourinho's side were going through a difficult period that had seen the *Giallorossi* win just one of their last seven matches, leaving them in 13th position in the Serie A table.

Even worse, Roma had suffered a humiliating 6-1 loss to Bodo/Glimt in the group stage of the Europa Conference League a few weeks earlier. The mood around the club was low and pressure was ramping up on the Portuguese boss in his first season in charge of the Italians.

For an injury-hit squad, Roma's bench didn't inspire much confidence either. But still, there was Nicolo Zaniolo, an Italy international, Carles Perez, an-ex Barcelona midfielder, and Borja Mayoral, a striker on loan from Real Madrid.

Yet Mourinho overlooked these more obvious games-changers, and instead opted to bring on Afena-Gyan.

The teenager entered the pitch with a quarter of an hour left and, eight minutes later, there was bedlam in the away end when he opened the scoring. It was the first goal of his senior career, and he added a second deep into stoppage-time as Roma won 2-0.

If Afena-Gyan's 15-minute cameo was impressive, the quality of his strikes was even more breathtaking. They were goals that vindicated Mourinho's decision to introduce the untested striker over his other experienced options in such a high-pressure game.

"Tomorrow the Primavera [youth side] will be playing – and I'm sorry for Alberto De Rossi (Roma's reserve team coach)

13

but Felix won't be playing with them," the Portuguese declared in the aftermath of Afena-Gyan's match-winning exploits.

Indeed, it was in the youth team that Mourinho first caught sight of Afena-Gyan. Roma's reserves usually train on a synthetic pitch next to the first team's base, and Afena-Gyan was one of the players who constantly caught the eye of anyone who cared to watch.

Mourinho had heard good reviews of a kid who had impressed the youth team coaches but he needed to see things for himself. When he finally did, he became a believer too.

"When I first watched him, I think the thing that most impressed me was his calmness in front of goal," the Roma boss later revealed.

"He might not be a phenomenon in terms of his technique, [but] in front of goal he is deadly. I was also struck by his humility, because often among the new generation you find kids who think they already know everything, who don't have that humility. But he is the opposite.

"He is absorbing our attitude, both mine and that of his team-mates. You can see he's learning off everyone. It's great to see that evolution."

It has been an incredible year for Afena-Gyan, who has progressively risen through the ranks at both club and international level. At the start of 2021, the young forward was still an amateur footballer in Ghana, unsure of where his future lay.

Born in Sunyani in the Bono Region of Ghana, Afena-Gyan's talent has always shone through. He was by far the most coveted talent at Berekum Presec, where he had his secondary education, and captained the school team to various inter-school and regional tournaments.

By the time he graduated in 2019, the closest he had come to a football club was playing for juvenile sides Real Madrid and Watomba 11, both based in Wenchi in the middle belt of Ghana. But it wasn't for a lack of interest from clubs.

On the contrary, several local and foreign academies had lined up to take the teenager while he was in school but his mother rebuffed every proposal that came. Eventually, the EurAfrica Academy won the race, having convinced Felix's mother with their impressive track record of moving youngsters on to some of Europe's elite clubs.

Afena-Gyan's meteoric rise has been akin to a Hollywood movie or a fairy tale, with rejection as well as glory. When EurAfrica felt he was ready to take the next step, they offered him to Milan and Sassuolo, and Afena-Gyan even travelled to have trials with the *Rossoneri*.

However, despite impressing and scoring a couple of goals in the games he featured in, the Serie A side turned

Europa Conference League winners... Afena-Gyan (second from left) celebrates with Ebrima Darboe, Tammy Abraham, Ainsley Maitland-Niles and Amadou Diawara

> "Tomorrow the Primavera [youth side] will be playing – and I'm sorry but Felix won't be playing with them"
>
> **Jose Mourinho on Afena-Gyan's match-winning goalscoring debut**

down the chance to sign him. That is how Roma came into the picture. The *Giallorossi* had already scouted the then 17-year-old and had him on their list of transfer targets.

In March 2021, Roma officially announced the capture of Afena-Gyan following a successful trial. The teenager moved straight from amateur footballer in Ghana to the Serie A, and began training with the club's U18s.

"Now that I am here, the target is to be in the first team and go on to become an important player for the club," Afena-Gyan told the BBC in his first interview after joining Roma. "I will work hard for it. I know it will come with a lot of challenges but I will stay focused and disciplined. I will stop at nothing to see that come to pass."

And that is exactly what he did. A day after his unveiling, the forward announced his presence by scoring and assisting in a 5-0 drubbing of Genoa in an U18 game.

Ghana international... Afena-Gyan made his Black Stars debut earlier this year

He scored again in his next two matches, making it three goals in as many games.

Afena-Gyan was clearly too good for the U18s and his bright start to life in Italy saw him immediately promoted to Roma's reserve side in the Primavera. Unfazed by the new challenge, he took the Primavera too by storm, scoring six goals in five matches to end the 2021-22 season as top scorer despite only joining at the tail end of the campaign.

Afena-Gyan's commendable exploits for Roma's youth and reserve sides may have been overlooked by previous coach Paulo Fonseca, but everything changed when Mourinho replaced his compatriot as Roma boss.

But despite taking notice of the promising striker, it wasn't until the October international break – when 13 Roma players were away on national duty – that Mourinho finally invited Afena-Gyan to train with the first team.

The teenager grabbed his chance with both hands, impressing the Portuguese manager with his pace and directness. His attributes were different to what Mourinho already had in his other forwards.

Mourinho rewarded Afena-Gyan with his first taste of senior football three weeks later when the youngster came on as a second-half substitute in Roma's 2-1 win over Cagliari in Serie A.

He would go on to net his double a month later as Roma beat Genoa 2-0. He would also become a regular member of the first team, making 20 appearances in all competitions as Mourinho's side finished sixth in Serie A and won the maiden edition of the Europa Conference League.

By March 2022, Afena-Gyan was a full Ghana international, having started in both legs of the World Cup play-offs as the Black Stars got the better of rivals Nigeria to book their place in Qatar. He scored his first international goal in Ghana's 3-0 victory against Madagascar in a 2023 Africa Cup of Nations qualifier in June, and now looks primed to be one of the first names on Otto Addo's list for the World Cup.

It has been a sublime calendar year for Afena-Gyan, who took rejection on the chin and turned it into motivation. A year ago, he was still only an amateur footballer in Ghana; now he's a European champion. A year ago, he was just a boy with a dream; now he's a Golden Boy nominee. A year ago, he arrived at Roma in fake trainers; now he's a Puma athlete. A year ago, he was only good enough for trials; now Cremonese are splashing €9 million to prise him away from Rome.

For many Roma supporters, it's sad to see Afena-Gyan leave after his breakthrough last season but, at 19, he deserves game time, especially ahead of the World Cup, and that cannot be guaranteed at the Stadio Olimpico following the signings of forwards Paulo Dybala and Andrea Belotti.

The Ghanaian's career will, however, be better served at Cremonese, where he's expected to be the main man at the newly-promoted Serie A side. The future looks very bright for Afena-Gyan as he prepares to continue his development in the city of Cremona. For Mourinho, though, the striker's rise adds to the tall list of Africans who have excelled under his wings.

"He is a long, long way from being the finished product," said the Portuguese manager of Afena-Gyan some months ago. "A long way from being a complete player and a long way from being the perfect player to start for a team like Roma. But he is a player that deserves to be worked with and deserves a chance to play." And play he will.

New challenge...Afena-Gyan in Cremonese kit
Instagram @ohenegyanfelix9

THE *FIRST* INTERNATIONAL

On the 150th anniversary of England and Scotland's first-ever meeting on a football pitch, Keir Radnedge looks back at the historic match

Against all the odds, national team football has revived and found a new rhythm. This is a massive relief for all those fans and federations who feared, for many years, that the power of international club competitions had rendered redundant the old structures of national prestige.

Remember that world federation FIFA had been created in 1904 simply as a networking tool, in modern jargon, to facilitate international fixtures.

The roaring success of the World Cup from the 1930s onwards and then the European Championship provided the anticipated glittering shop window for national teams. But the age of the jet engine delivered a simultaneous explosion of international club competition, not only in Europe but in Africa and South America. The result was angry pushback from resentful, possessive clubs over player release.

National team friendly matches, once grand prestige occasions (think England against Austria in 1932, Italy in 1934 and Hungary in 1953), crumbled in value and allure. Players, their managers and clubs conjured up ever more inventive excuses to skip the disruptive nuisance. Wales' Ryan Giggs, under the watchful eye of Sir Alex Ferguson, was a notable escapologist.

Player release was a war zone into which Michel Platini introduced a ceasefire 20 years ago by devising the unified international calendar with formal national team breaks. World Cup qualifiers took up half the four-year cycle and UEFA occupied the other half with its new Nations League cash cow.

Suddenly national team football, beyond the World Cup, mattered again. Statistics tell the tale. Some 592 players around the world have attained a magic century of caps; of those, no fewer than 528 have scaled the peak in the past two decades. Only 64 centenarians completed their national team careers in the last century (although records of players with 100 caps are compromised by disagreements on the status of many early matches as well as Olympic Games ties from the so-called "amateur era"), with England centre-half Billy Wright the first, in 1959.

The modern creation of dozens of new nations and matching expansion of FIFA membership and regional competitions helped fuel the explosion of matches and consequent player appearances. Hence the rise and fall and rise again of the national team roller-coaster ever since Scotland and England set the ball rolling (literally) at 2.20pm on the afternoon of Saturday, November 30, 1872.

The Football Association, one and only original, had been founded just over nine years earlier on October 26, 1863. The so-called "people's game" was built on a regulatory format handed down by men from universities and public schools.

The FA Cup was already firmly established by February 1870 when *The Sportsman* newspaper announced that "a match between leading representatives of the

1873
adidas
Heineken

Venue of the return match...the Oval

Illustration...an artistic depiction of the encounter at the Oval

Scotch and English sections will be played at The Oval on Saturday, 19 February." Interested players were invited to contact Charles Alcock, the FA's new honorary secretary.

Alcock was a remarkable man, a moving spirit in the structural development of sport as secretary of both the FA and the Surrey County Cricket Club.

He had been born in Sunderland, second son of a ship-builder wealthy enough to educate him at Harrow. Alcock never returned home. He stayed in London, married and developed a career as an insurance broker and then journalist. Much of his time was devoted to sport. Not merely writing and organising but playing. Alcock would captain Wanderers to success in the first FA Cup final, in 1872.

Two years earlier he had followed up a discussion among his fellow pioneers to propose a series of matches between local players representing England and Scotland. Alcock himself played in a 1-0 win over the Anglo-Scots on November 19, 1870. A rematch on February 25, 1871, ended 1-1.

Alcock envisaged bigger and better. So he followed through with a letter to the *Glasgow Herald* proposing the involvement of "prominent celebrities of football on the Northern side of the Tweed". His letter achieved a more significant effect than even he would have expected.

Queen's Park, already established as Scotland's leading club, volunteered to represent Scottish interests and nominated Robert Smith, who had recently moved to London, as their delegate. Simultaneously a group of Scottish-based rugby players were provoked into representative action of their own. Hence rugby football beat association football to the punch with its first official international, between Scotland and England, in Edinburgh on March 27, 1871.

Eventually, 20 months later, the first official association football international took place on Saturday, November 30, 1872. The Scottish team was selected by Queen's Park. Hence some pedantic historians still vainly question the match status because no Scottish Football Association yet existed.

A crowd of between 2,500 and 4,000 spectators turned out at the West of Scotland Cricket Club ground in Hamilton Crescent, Partick. According to the *North British Mail*, this was "the largest assemblage seen at a football match in Scotland... including a good number of ladies." The report is quoted in Keith Booth's comprehensive biography of Alcock which is appropriately entitled *The Father of Modern Sport*.

Both teams were afflicted by the late changes so familiar in later years. A review in *The Official History of the Football Association* (1953), noted: "M P Betts (Harrow Chequers), C W Alcock (Wanderers), T C Hooman (Wanderers) and A Morten (Crystal Palace) were unable to play for various reasons while Scotland, for their part, could not obtain the services of A F Kinnaird (Wanderers) and Lieutenant H W Remny-Tailyour [*sic – Renny-Tailyour*] (Royal Engineers), Scotsmen of great fame in the south."

Most of the English players arrived at their chosen Carrick's Royal Hotel in George Square, Glasgow, the day before the game. Four more were unable to leave London until the evening and travelled north through the night. These included Alcock himself, reduced to a role as umpire after being injured against Eton in an old boys' match. Bad weather prevented any pre-match workout.

Then, as now, Scotland wore blue, England white. For the tactically curious, England lined up in a 1-1-8 formation,

Scotland in a 2-2-6. Kick-off was set for 2pm, but was delayed by a fine drizzle until 2.20pm. Sadly for posterity no exponents of the fledgling art of newspaper photography were present to record the great event. However *Punch* illustrator William Ralston produced nine drawings for a weekly newspaper called *The Graphic*. These included an impression of an overhead kick by Scotland's William Mackinnon years before Leonidas, Carlo Parola, Uwe Seeler or Cristiano Ronaldo were even born.

Scottish football historian Andy Mitchell, in his forensic book *First Elevens*, notes that admission cost was one shilling (ladies free) for a total revenue of £103. Queen's Park's staging costs tallied £69, 11 shillings and six pence which "generated a surplus of £33 and eight shillings... set aside as a travel fund for the return match."

The teams who made history were:

SCOTLAND

R Gardner (Queen's Park, captain), W Ker (Granville & Queen's Park), J Taylor (Queen's Park), J J Thomson (Queen's Park), J Smith (South Norwood & Queen's Park), R Smith (South Norwood & Queen's Park), J B Weir (Queen's Park), R Leckie (Queen's Park), A Rhind (Queen's Park), W M Mackinnon (Queen's Park), D Wotherspoon (Queen's Park).

ENGLAND

R Barker (Hertfordshire Rangers), E H Greenhalgh (Notts), R C Welch (Harrow Chequers & Wanderers), F Chappell (Oxford University), C J Ottway (Oxford University), A K Smith (Oxford University), C J Chenery (Crystal Palace), J C Clegg (Sheffield), J Brockbank (Cambridge University), W J Maynard (1st Surrey Rifles), C J Morice (Barnes). Umpires: C W Alcock (FA), H N Smith (Queen's Park). Referee: W Keay (Queen's Park).

Despite the presence of 14 forwards on the pitch – 16 if you include the two starting goalkeepers, who both switched positions with an outfield team-mate at half-time – the outcome was a goalless draw. None of the 14 (or 16) managed a goal between them.

Nonetheless, a lengthy essay in the weekly *Bell's Life* hailed "one of the jolliest, one of the most spirited and most pleasant matches that have ever been played according to association rules."

It added: "After the match itself, at the invitation of the Scottish XI, both sides dined together at Carrick's Hotel, in company with a number of football players of Scottish notoriety. A thoroughly enjoyable evening was spent...The English were treated with a warmth of hospitality which they hope to be able fully to repay on the occasion of the return match, which will take place at the [Kennington] Oval in London, some time in February next."

England's historic challenge against Scotland remained the cornerstone of the British Home Championship until fading enthusiasm for national team football brought about its demise in 1984

In fact, the return was played not in February but the following March. England won 4-2. They had learned an important lesson from the first match. According to the four-volume FA-endorsed *Association Football*, published in 1960, England had "second thoughts [about tactics] and played in the same formation as their opponents."

One thing led to another. England began playing Wales in 1879 and Ireland in 1882. Their first recognised international against foreign opposition was a 6-1 win over Austria on June 6, 1908. By then professionalism had been legalised (in 1885), the Football League founded (in 1888) and tactics evolved to a 2-3-5 formation. Scotland widened their fixture list to first confront Ireland in 1884 and Wales in 1886.

For the record, the first international between two non-British and Irish foreign teams is generally held to have been Argentina's 6-0 win over Uruguay in Montevideo in July 1902. The second match was the first official international in continental Europe: a 5-0 win for Austria v Hungary on October 12, 1902.

Technically the latter two neighbours were not independent nations but existed within the dual-monarchy of the sprawling Austro-Hungarian Empire. But then England and Scotland were not independent nations either.

Issues of jurisdiction continue to fester: consider the current independent membership within FIFA of the Chinese FA alongside Chinese Taipei, Macau and Hong Kong.

England's historic challenge against Scotland remained the cornerstone of the British Home Championship until fading enthusiasm for national team football brought about its demise in 1984. Since then the old enemies have matched up only 13 times, most recently the goalless draw in last year's rescheduled Euros finals. Occasional attempts to revive the duel have fallen victim to the calendar crush.

One problem of which the visionary Charles Alcock was spared.

British Home Championship... England versus Scotland in 1923

Victory
ULTRA

SPECIAL REPORT

PLAYER POWER

How football's international players' union can be a force for good in the game

Words: Jamie Evans

Jonas Baer-Hoffmann sighs. "This is not the work that we're normally set up to do." The general secretary of FIFPro has just described his organisation's work in helping footballers get out of Ukraine after the Russian invasion, and female players escape from Taliban rule in Afghanistan. To say that he is frustrated by the way that football is run would be an understatement. "The governance of football is in a massive crisis in the way that decisions are being taken," he says.

The International Federation of Professional Footballers, or FIFPro for short, is the worldwide representative body for footballers, representing 66 different national unions and over 60,000 players. Most football fans will probably be familiar with the organisation for its role in the annual FIFA Best awards, where they organise the players' votes for the Men's and Women's World XIs. Their name also appears when you fire up *FIFA* on a games console, thanks to their commercial arm's role in player licences.

Yet not only is this just a small fraction of their work, it is almost irrelevant when compared with what they have been occupied with this year. As Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine in February, FIFPro sprang into action.

"We were involved, silently, in a number of evacuations of players and their families," explains Jonas. "We would organise drivers for them, and organise people who would receive them on the other side of the border.

"But the ultimate decision of whether they get in the car and drive and take the risk, or stay put and take that risk – you can't give that from afar."

The precise role of FIFPro varied from case to case.

"There were some groups where we were directly speaking to the players. There were a couple of groups where the agents of those players were on the ground with them, and they were coordinating. There were a couple of cases where the Ukrainian union was helping. There were cases where the unions of the countries where these players were from were the liaisons. So there's always different lines and you work with what you have."

At the heart of the union's work is in building networks, and they utilise that to help players where they can. "The players have an advantage of being footballers, in that there is an international community who is more organised and able to help them. At the same time, they are more prominent figures and therefore sometimes under more threat, as well."

Alongside those dramatic circumstances, FIFPro were also involved in some of football's more practical considerations in responding to the conflict. After the invasion, FIFA were initially reluctant to disqualify Russia from World Cup qualifying, instead suggesting that their play-off with Poland be moved to a neutral venue. The Polish players' union led the objections, and turned to FIFPro to help facilitate those conversations.

The next consideration was the contracts of players not only in Ukraine but also in Russia, where many foreign players felt unable to continue working.

FIFPro general secretary...Jonas Baer-Hoffmann

Amendments to transfer regulations were required in order to allow players to find clubs in new countries, and again FIFPro were central to those discussions.

If this feels like an extreme, unprecedented situation for a footballers' union to deal with, the truth is that they had already become accustomed to extreme circumstances. In Afghanistan, fears for the safety of women's national team players had grown ever since the Taliban retook power in August 2021.

Shortly after the takeover, Shamila Kohestani, a former captain of the Afghanistan women's team, told *World Soccer*: "Women playing sports was never acceptable to the Taliban and I don't believe they will allow women to play sports, especially one as male-dominated as football." Players were urged to close down social media accounts out of fears that they would be identified as having been involved with the team and punished.

"Afghanistan had a completely different context [to Ukraine]," says Jonas. "They were in the middle of this takeover by the Taliban. What was different was that you were looking at a very small window in which the evacuation routes to the international community were available, while the Americans and the British were holding the airport in Kabul.

"The work there was about, firstly, getting the players on lists that were piling up with tens of thousands of people who were looking for these very limited flights to get out of the country.

"Then the second part was that it was incredibly dangerous for them to get to the airport. So the stories of the physical violence that they experienced are very, very severe.

"When we started that process, realistically, we had no expectation of what we would be able to achieve, we just felt that we needed to do something. We had an incredible group of people who had worked with this team for a long time – even before it was actually recognised by the federation as an official national team. They were in constant contact with them, and were basically talking them through their pathway to safety.

Reunited...the Afghanistan women's team in Australia

"We were trying to provide that window of escape for them through our channels to government and the military, and then the applications for humanitarian visas for people to be relocated."

In August 2021, the Australian government announced they had evacuated 75 Afghan women athletes, including football players. By early 2022, the team had regrouped in Melbourne and partnered with A-League side Melbourne Victory, allowing them to train together. In March they entered Football Victoria's state league.

"We are relieved that this group of footballers and athletes have been able to leave Afghanistan," Jonas told *Sky Sports* after the evacuation. But the situation also highlighted just how ineffective football's governance can be.

"It feels problematic that there aren't better structures to help people in these circumstances," he says. "We're doing what we can out of the motivation that we had an opportunity to help, and fortunately we've been relatively successful with that.

"But at the same time, you're wondering if all the means that much larger sport organisations have – in terms of their budget and their relationships with government – if they were applied in a similar manner, how much more could be done?"

Disillusionment with football's decision-makers is a recurring theme for Jonas. "The way that the institutions are actually accountable to the people in the game – whether it's the players, whether it's the fans – has a massive democratic gap. And the people that are affected by the decisions rarely have the kind of say that they should.

"That's across the game; that is in situations of crisis like this [Ukraine and Afghanistan], but also when you talk about the match calendar, when you talk about tournament reforms, when you talk about the transfer system.

"I think the structures, at the moment, are not capable of taking modern, progressive decisions that are actually good for the game, and that is where my frustration lies."

FIFPro have many objections to the way that football is run, all of which ultimately boil down to the wellbeing of the people they represent. Modern players, Jonas says, have been "commoditised more than ever before".

Far from simply complaining from the sidelines, FIFPro are proactive in offering solutions. "We've moved as an organisation from a point where we've been criticising what's wrong, towards actually providing intelligence and solution-building ability to craft how it could be done better," says Jonas. "We've been advocating for very clear policies on concussions for

"I think the structures, at the moment, are not capable of taking modern, progressive decisions that are actually good for the game"

Jonas Baer-Hoffmann, FIFPro's general secretary

a long time. We've been providing research on the analysis of the overload of elite players for three or four years."

In May for example, FIFPro's latest report on player workloads – the Player & High Performance Coach Surveys – was released, with over 1,500 professional players participating. It called for a number of changes to the way that football is scheduled in order to create a "calendar that respects player's health."

While FIFPro continues to advocate for amendments across a range of issues, at the core of their mission is increased player empowerment and influence.

"Most of the regulations are not actually sought from the perspective of the person that they affect. Everybody recognises that there are too many games for the elite players and too little games for the majority of players. And yet we keep adding games at the top.

"That's the crux of the whole thing; these decisions are not being taken by institutions that are governing the game with the interests of the players at heart."

The question then, is how can FIFPro achieve greater influence? "We always had that mentality that we're punching a little bit above our weight class," admits Jonas. Yet surprisingly, he has optimism. "When the force of the players is united, then they always have incredible strength.

"We see it working again and again. It's a tiny football market to people in Europe, but the players in Panama shut the league down for a weekend [in April this year] and didn't play.

"Then you take the example of the players in the NWSL, the Women's League in the US. Within two years they have flipped that league on its head and have carved out massive progress and made it one of the most attractive labour markets for foreigners, and at the same time rooted out systemic sexual abuse in their game.

"That's collective strength, that's them coming together, and actually shaping their own industries. I think the trajectory is incredibly positive and I'm very optimistic."

Alongside these collective movements, Jonas also highlights the rising influence of individual players.

"It's almost an overused example now, but what Marcus Rashford is doing is probably more impactful on society than the vast majority of leaders of sports organisations combined.

"The influence of individual players in the public discourse is greater than that of any football administrator in the world. This generation of players in particular, is starting to understand the power of their platforms, and they've been applying it for social change."

Former Finland captain Tim Sparv is another example of a player using their platform for social change. In 2021 he wrote an article for *The Players' Tribune* entitled We Need to Talk About Qatar, highlighting the plight of workers in the 2022 World Cup host nation. Earlier this year he visited the Middle Eastern country with FIFPro, and called for the pressure to be kept on Qatar. "We're still seeing late payments. We're still seeing people being taken advantage of," he said. "There are still things that we need to keep talking about. We don't want things to go back to how they once were."

The selection of World Cup hosts is perhaps the most glaring example of the disconnect between football's decision-makers and players and fans. So, can Jonas imagine a future where FIFPro has a much greater say on decisions like these?

"In this regard, I'm an optimist.

"Look, should players have an exclusive right to decide on every competition for them? No. There are many stakeholders in the game who should have a say. But can you ultimately run any of those competitions without the players? No, no chance.

"I think there is no way that the power of the players is ultimately undeniable. It's not yet where it needs to be. But I'm convinced that it is an unavoidable reality that will come.

"In so many countries, there is real collective bargaining going on. There are unions with veto rights on anything that concerns the relation between clubs and players. But internationally that does not yet exist at the same level, and that's the thing that needs to be changed urgently.

"So that's why the role of FIFPro will only grow in importance for the players because ultimately that's where they can get to the root cause of the challenges that they see affecting their careers."

Speaking out ...Tim Sparv

Impactful ...Marcus Rashford

Glenn Moore

World Cup qualifying round-up

Twenty-five teams have confirmed their places alongside hosts Australia and New Zealand

All roads lead to Sydney...Australia and New Zealand will host next year's World Cup

It is probably just a coincidence that Auckland's Aotea Centre staged *Macbeth* shortly before it hosts the Women's 2023 World Cup draw on October 22, but maybe someone thought William Shakespeare's cautionary tale about a powerful, ambitious woman would be a suitable precursor.

More appropriate would have been one of his many plays in which women had to disguise themselves as male to be accepted, such as Rosalind in *As You Like It* or Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, as that is what many female footballers had to do when younger.

That still applies in some countries, but increasingly few as the qualifying campaign to reach the World Cup – to be hosted by Australia and New Zealand in 2023 – has illustrated.

A record 172 nations entered, a rise of 28 on the previous edition, though that still left 35 absentees. Most of those were small federations with, as yet, neither the numbers nor the resources to field a women's team. Others were nations in turmoil when qualifying began such as Syria, Iraq and Libya.

The exceptions are mainly in the Arabian Peninsula with only Jordan, Bahrain and UAE entering. Men's World Cup 2022 hosts Qatar did not enter a women's team – they did not play a single match between 2014 and 2021.

An expanded finals – up to 32 places – has enabled Morocco, the Philippines, Vietnam and Zambia to qualify for the first time. More potential debutants are in with a chance of coming through February's ten-team intercontinental play-offs for the final three slots.

EUROPE

It was a gamble that paid off, but only by the barest of margins. After a disappointing Euros the Dutch federation sacked English coach Mark Parsons after less than a year at the helm and brought in Andries Jonker.

Jonker, 60, has spent almost all his career in the men's game, most recently as coach of Telstar, with his CV also featuring seven months as manager of Wolfsburg, an interim spell managing Bayern Munich after serving as Louis van Gaal's assistant, and academy head at Arsenal.

The first task of this unexpected choice was to qualify for the World Cup. Two draws with the Czech Republic left the Dutch a point behind Iceland going into the group's final game, between the pair, in Utrecht. A win booked a World Cup place; anything else sent the 2019 finalists into a tricky play-off series.

Entering injury-time, the match was goalless. Then, with 103 seconds of added time remaining, teenager Esmee Brugts floated in a left-wing cross that eluded everyone to nestle inside the far post. The Netherlands were through, and ignominy was averted.

Other leading nations had few alarms. France, Sweden and Spain wrapped up qualification back in April followed by Denmark in May. Norway, Germany and England also did so with a game to spare.

Italy had to wait until their final match to edge out Switzerland but, even after their disastrous Euros, a home win over Romania was little more than a formality.

The nine group runners-up were left to chase three qualifying places in a two-round play-off series from October 6-11. The two winners with the best overall record in the group stages and play-offs will gain direct entry to the finals. The other goes into the intercontinental play-offs.

UEFA play-off series:
Portugal/Belgium v Iceland;
Scotland/Austria v Republic of Ireland;
Switzerland v Wales/Bosnia-Herzegovina

> A record 172 nations entered, a rise of 28 on the previous edition, though that still left 35 absentees

AFRICA

The final four at July's Women's Africa Cup of Nations – South Africa, Morocco, ever-presents Nigeria and newcomers Zambia – all won a place in the finals. Cameroon and Senegal will have a second attempt at qualifying in the intercontinental play-offs.

ASIA

China, South Korea, Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam, the latter two debutants, all qualified via the Women's Asian Cup held in India in January-February. Chinese Taipei and Thailand are in the play-offs.

Australia booked an automatic spot as co-hosts but their preparation has been far from smooth. A highly promising fourth place at the Tokyo Olympics has not been built upon. They were knocked out of the Asian Cup at the quarter-final stage and slid to their lowest level in the FIFA rankings since 2010.

In his defence, coach Tony Gustavsson has been busy adding depth to the squad blooding 13 debutants in 2021, and has opted to play friendlies against high-level opposition such as the US, Canada and Spain. Wins, however, have been rare.

CONCACAF

United States, the World Cup holders, and Olympic champions Canada, qualified via July's regional W Championship along with Jamaica and Costa Rica. Heading for the intercontinental play-offs are Haiti and Panama.

The US are likely to start favourites to defend the title won in France in 2019 having won 18 and drawn three of the

21 matches played since their shock Olympics semi-final defeat to Canada. This run has been sustained despite Vlatko Andonovski overhauling an ageing squad by introducing a raft of new faces.

However, most have been against weak opposition at home – the US have found it increasingly hard to lure strong teams to their shores and rarely play overseas. An exception was the W Championship, in the final of which they defeated Canada 1-0 in Mexico. They also visit Wembley on October 7 to face 2022 European Championship winners England, which will be a useful measure of where both teams are.

SOUTH AMERICA

Brazil, Colombia and Argentina qualified via the Copa America Femenina in July with Paraguay and Chile making the intercontinental play-offs.

OCEANIA

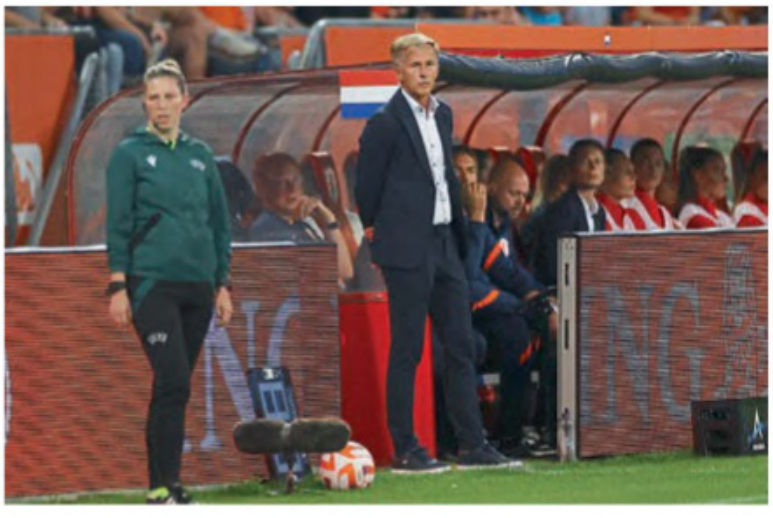
With New Zealand qualifying as co-hosts there was only one play-off spot available. That has been claimed by Papua New Guinea, thanks to their victory in the OFC Women's Nations Cup in July.

However, they will head to the play-offs without the coach that led them to the success. Nicola Demaine, the British-born coach with wide experience in the region, will be replaced. In January, she took over a team that had not played since 2019, but within six months she led the *Lakatois* to their most significant success. But PNGFA president John Kapi Natto said: "We are trying to put someone in there who can take us to the next level."

Intercontinental play-off qualifiers: Thailand, Chinese Taipei (Asia), Haiti, Panama (CONCACAF), Cameroon, Senegal (Africa), Paraguay, Chile (South America), Papua New Guinea (Oceania), plus one as yet unknown European team.

Play-offs to be held in New Zealand in Hamilton and Auckland in February 2023. Three teams will progress to the finals.

New appointment... Netherlands coach Andries Jonker



Round-up

Knockout blow...Weir celebrates scoring against her old team

MANCHESTER CITY SUFFER AT SPANISH HANDS YET AGAIN

Manchester City were the main casualties in the Champions League first qualifying round, losing to Spanish opposition for the fifth successive season. Just like last season, they were knocked out by Real Madrid via a 1-0 defeat, this time with Caroline Weir – who left City in the summer – scoring the only goal.

Former finalists Fortuna Hjorring, of Denmark, were also sent packing, as were Eintracht Frankfurt, Paris FC, Twente, Anderlecht and 2020 quarter-finalists Glasgow City.

MOROCCO DOUBLE UP ON WAFCON HOSTING

Morocco, successful hosts of this year's Women's Africa Cup of Nations, have been awarded the 2024 competition. More than 50,000 watched Morocco lose to South Africa in the final.

NWSL SACKINGS

Two more coaches have been sacked from the once-secure NWSL dugout after just a year in the post: Scott Parkinson at Gotham FC and, more surprisingly, last year's Championship winner Kris Ward at Washington Spirit.

Parkinson was axed after eight defeats in the opening 12 games this season. Former Jamaica coach Hue Menzies was his interim replacement.

Ward was dismissed after 15 games without a win, albeit nine were drawn. Albertin Montoya was appointed interim coach.

Sacked ...Scott Parkinson

Champions...Spain's Under-20s team ahead of the World Cup semi-final against Netherlands

SPAIN ARE JUNIOR WORLD CHAMPIONS

Spain have won the Under-20 World Cup, defeating Japan 3-1 in the final in Costa Rica. Brazil took bronze, beating Netherlands in the third place play-off. The US and Germany surprisingly went out in the group stage of the 16-team competition.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE MOVES CLOSER

College of Asian Scholars, from Thailand, have won the AFC Women's Club Championship 2022 East. They will take on West Zone's Sogdiana Jizzakh, of Uzbekistan, on October 21 to contest the final of the latest pilot competition paving the way for the launch of a Champions League in 2024. The mini-tournament follows events in 2019 and 2021 with 11 nations so far involved.

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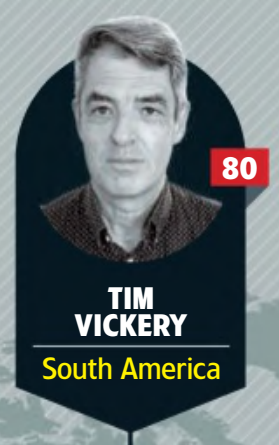
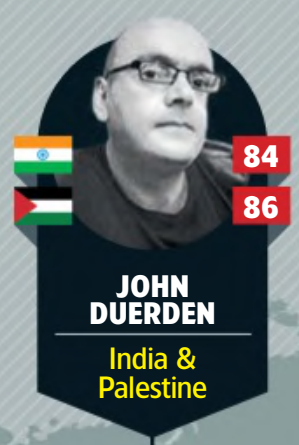


TIM VICKERY
South America



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Copa Libertadores ...finalists decided

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Making history...Liechtenstein's Vaduz defy the odds

South America

TIM VICKERY

Brazil eyes another double

For the second year in a row, Brazilian clubs could win both the Copas Libertadores and Sudamericana

Brazil's domination of the Copa Libertadores continues, with the country providing both finalists for the third consecutive year.

And for the third time in four seasons, one of the finalists is Rio de Janeiro giants Flamengo, whose collection of attacking talent has blown away all comers in the competition, with 12-goal centre-forward Pedro especially impressive.

Flamengo go into the final after a campaign of 11 wins and a draw. In the quarter-finals they beat compatriots Corinthians home and away, weathering some awkward moments in the first halves before making their superiority count after scoring the first goal.

Their semi-final was barely a contest. Velez Sarsfield were the last Argentine club standing, having followed up a shock win over River Plate in the last 16 with another triumph over compatriots in the quarter-finals, beating Talleres home and away. But they were languishing in the Argentine first division – and languished all the more after foolishly going with an attacking line-up in the semis and being picked off 4-0 at home in the first leg against Flamengo, with the prolific Pedro netting a hat-trick. A 2-1 defeat in the Maracana a week later was about as good as they could expect.

Another Argentine side, though, had reason for complaint about their elimination by Brazilian opponents. Rugged and with flashes of talent,

Into the final... Athletico Parananese celebrate overcoming Palmeiras in Sao Paulo

Two in a row... Flamengo striker Pedro celebrates after firing his team to another Libertadores final

Challenging Brazilian dominance...Independiente del Valle's Ecuadorian defender Luis Segovia

Estudiantes had looked Argentina's best bet of making progress. They played two predictably tight and bruising quarter-final encounters against Luiz Felipe Scolari's Athletico Paranaense. A goalless draw in Curitiba was followed by a controversial return game in La Plata, where Estudiantes had a goal mystifyingly ruled out for offside. In stoppage time, with penalties looming, 17-year-old wonderkid Vitor Roque headed home the decisive goal – the second consecutive round in which Athletico snatched qualification in the final seconds.

Their semi-final opponents were Palmeiras of Brazil, seeking to become the first side in almost 50 years to win the Libertadores three times in a row. For the second consecutive year they won a tight victory over Atletico Mineiro (after beating them in 2021 on away goals in the semis), this time on spot-kicks in the quarters. Palmeiras fought back from two goals down to draw the first leg, and had to fight all the way after going down to ten men in the rematch. For a few minutes it was 9 v 11 until Atletico saw a red card. With some late scares, Palmeiras ground their way to shootout success.

Their Portuguese coach Abel Ferreira is a fascinating case – highly talented, with cold, meticulous planning alongside a clear lack of emotional control on the touchline, which seems in danger of contaminating his team. After losing the away leg 1-0 to Athletico Paranaense, Palmeiras hit form in the rematch, scored early and seemed in control – until they suffered yet another straight red card, their third in three games, when Murilo was given his marching orders.

The ten men got themselves ahead on aggregate, going 2-0 up early in the second half through Gustavo Gomez. But Ferreira is something of a tortured soul. His team can massacre weak opponents but tend to play the big games very tight. They sat deep and were punished, with the introduction of centre-forward Pablo giving Athletico a focal point that enabled them to snatch two goals. The second came when a shot from David Terans took a deflection – the occupational hazard of the deep-lying defence.

There was some joy, however, for Palmeiras' local rivals Sao Paulo, who forced their way through two shootouts against fellow Brazilians – Ceara and Atletico Goianiense – to reach the final of the Copa Sudamericana.

While the Libertadores was dominated by Brazil with five of the quarter-finalists, the Sudamericana proved more diverse. All ten countries were represented in the last 16. But Brazil, predictably, came through strongly, supplying both teams in one semi-final. Something similar could have happened in the other half of the draw, but Santos surprisingly lost to Deportivo Tachira of Venezuela in the last 16 and, just as unexpectedly, Internacional were knocked out by Melgar of Peru in the quarter-finals – both on penalties.

This eased the task of the remarkable Independiente del Valle, who won home and away against both Tachira and Melgar to make it to the decider, becoming the first non-Brazilian side in two years to reach a continental final. A tiny club from the outskirts of Quito, Ecuador, they exist to develop and sell players. But they have seen that they can also win titles along the way: they claimed the Sudamericana in 2019 and are the reigning Ecuadorian champions. With the most recent crop of youngsters sold and the next bunch not yet ready, the current side contains many Argentines and a Chilean – meaning that they can claim to be representing the rest of the continent when they take on Sao Paulo in the final.

While the Libertadores was dominated by Brazil with five of the quarter-finalists, the Sudamericana proved more diverse. All ten countries were represented in the last 16

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Presentation... Walid Regragui with president of the Royal Moroccan Football Federation Fouzi Lekjaa

Morocco change hands ahead of Qatar

The Atlas Lions enter a new period under coach Walid Regragui

Morocco have kept up a time-honoured pre-World Cup African tradition and looked to shoot themselves in the foot, just months before the kick-off of the tournament in Qatar, with the sacking of Vahid Halilhodzic.

Dismissing a coach on the eve of the World Cup finals seems pure folly, and previous panicked changes by African countries ahead of the 2002, 2006 and 2010 tournaments have verified this.

Halilhodzic's departure was not unexpected, it had been brewing for almost a year, making the lateness of the decision by Morocco's powerful football federation president Fouzi Lekjaa even more ludicrous.

Coach and employer had been at odds on several occasions and, by all accounts, Halilhodzic did not run a happy camp. The issue of star man Hakim Ziyech's exile from the Morocco team, in particular, was a populist stick with which the Moroccan media could beat him.

Previously, Nigeria and South Africa had changed coaches months ahead of the 2002 finals, ensuring a poor result, as did Togo in 2006 and Nigeria again in 2010, along with the Ivory Coast. Halilhodzic was the Ivorian coach then and, after a poor Cup of Nations finals five months prior to the World Cup in South Africa, got sacked, to be replaced by Sven-Goran Eriksson. Japan also fired him ahead of the finals in Russia making this latest dismissal a bizarre trio of sackings.

To qualify a country for the World Cup and then be fired before the tournament once would seem

Departed...Vahid Halilhodzic

unfortunate, but three times does not paint a good picture. The 69-year-old Bosnian coach's public interaction was usually testy and sideline demeanour also without much empathy.

Walid Regragui, 47, has been named as his replacement and will take Morocco to the Qatar tournament. He has signed a four-year deal up to, and including, the 2026 finals in North America.

French-born, he played for Morocco at right-back when they reached the Cup of Nations final in Tunisia in 2004 and has had coaching success with FUS Rabat and then Wydad Casablanca, as they won the African Champions League in May.

He will have only two preparatory games before the tournament in Qatar – against Chile and Paraguay in Spain in the September window, which has been cleared of Cup of Nations qualifying obligations.

Ironically, Ziyech's return to the squad comes at a time when the midfielder can no longer make the line-up at Chelsea.

The idea of the postponement of the AFCON 2023 qualifiers was brewing for months but took a surprisingly long time to be approved, leaving Africa's World Cup finalists potentially short-changed before the finals kick off in Qatar.

Confederation of African Football (CAF) president Patrice Motsepe has spoken often, in the 18-odd months since he took over, of a desire to do everything possible to make African sides much more competitive in world competition.

But one of the few things he could have affected, in the build-up to the 2022 finals, would have been to free up dates on the international calendar to allow African sides a chance for better preparatory games.

World Cup qualification on the continent was almost complete when CAF announced that the FIFA windows for national team activity in June and September – the last two before the World Cup finals – would be used for Africa Cup of Nations qualification, with the finals also moved to January 2024.

This condemned the Qatar-bound countries to not only have to play matches against inferior opposition, but also denied them a chance to test themselves against national teams from other continents.

Senegal coach Aliou Cisse flagged up this problem as soon as the calendar was fixed but his pleas for some sort of exemption were ignored for months.

It was only on the last day of July that CAF finally acceded to the request and postponed the September window of matches, leaving countries to scramble to organise worthy friendlies.

The potential list of opponents excluded European teams, as they already had UEFA Nations League commitments, but Asian and South American opposition have been secured...at the last minute.

Cameroon will play Uzbekistan and South Korea, while Senegal have games against Bolivia and Iran.

Ghana and Tunisia have been able to get a prestige friendly each against South American giants Brazil, with the five-time world champions looking for an African test as they have Cameroon in their group.

Recalled ...Hakim Ziyech

To qualify a country for the World Cup and then be fired before the tournament once would seem unfortunate, but three times does not paint a good picture

Tough test...Ghana and Tunisia are set to play against Brazil

India

JOHN DUERDEN

FIFA lifts ban on Indian federation

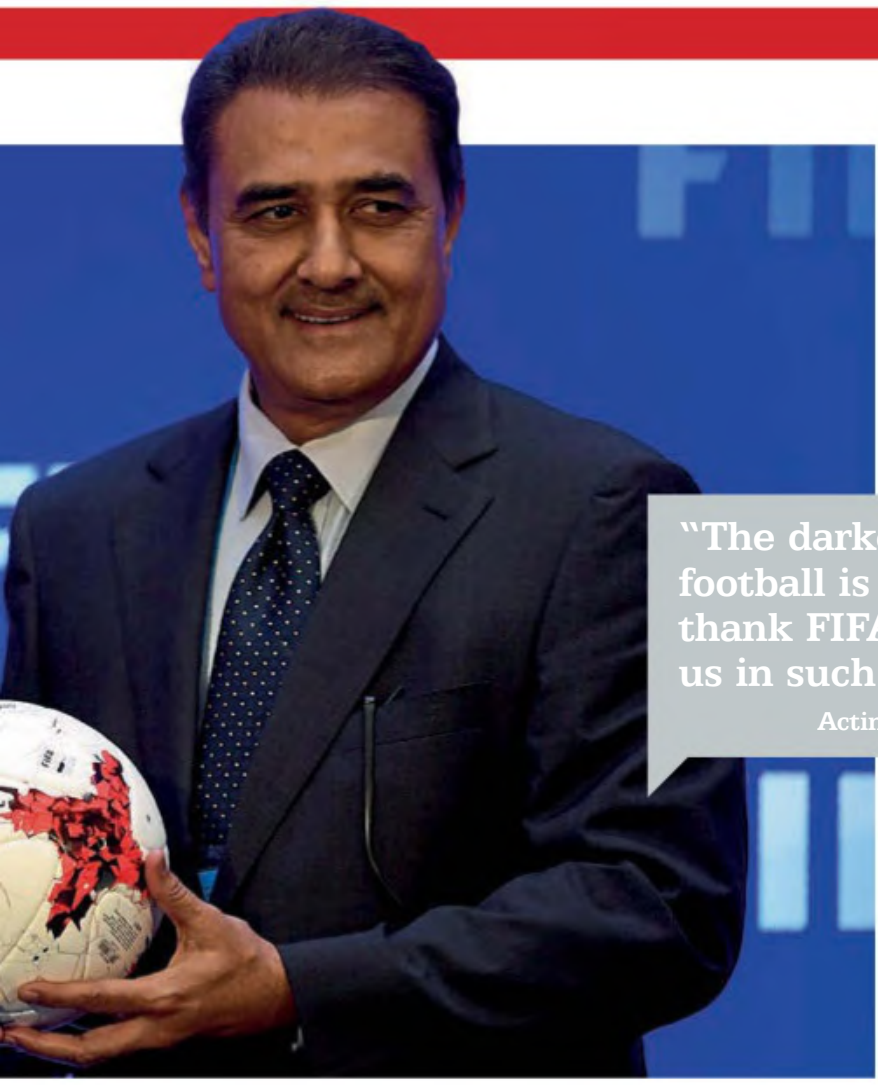
Initial suspension lasts only nine days

On August 17, FIFA banned the All India Football Federation (AIFF). Nine days later, the ban was lifted. It may have been short – certainly compared to the 15 months that neighbouring Pakistan served before their punishment was lifted in July – but there were real worries that had it gone on any longer, it could have had a hugely negative impact on the game on the subcontinent.

It came, as it often does, because of "undue influence from third parties". It started with AIFF CEO Praful Patel staying on too long. He had taken over in 2008 and should have stepped down in 2020 after three terms of four years. The ambitious Patel, who became a member of FIFA Council in 2019, said that there were constitutional issues that still needed to be sorted, a plausible excuse in a country that loves red tape and bureaucracy.

In March, the Sports Ministry gave a thumbs down to how the AIFF had been performing, reduced its funding considerably and told the Supreme Court to sort out the elections. The court formed a three-man

Reinstated ...the Indian national team



Stayed on too long ...former AIFF CEO Praful Patel (R) with FIFA president Gianni Infantino in 2017

Committee of Administrators (CoA) who were supposed to organise the ballot in June, a task that was then put back to September amid worries that they were trying to do too much and losing focus on their main task.

There had been quite a lot of debate in the country of 1.4 billion as to whether a ban would come. National team captain Sunil Chhetri said that it would be "catastrophic". Nerves were understandable with precedents in Asia in recent times with Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, Indonesia, Timor Leste and Pakistan all being hit with bans. FIFA had shown plenty of interest and encouragement to India over the years. Sepp Blatter was a regular visitor, forging a well-worn path now followed by Gianni Infantino. India had hosted the 2017 U17 World Cup, and many thought that hosting the women's tournament this October would stay FIFA's hand.

So did CoA member Dr SY Quraishi: "Football elections were long overdue, the erstwhile team had stayed on past its tenure and elections were necessary," he said. "I don't see a non-compliance issue with FIFA here. We hope that FIFA will understand and cooperate and we will cooperate with them as we try to finish this task given to us by the court."

FIFA didn't understand and was soon issuing a ban. "The suspension will be lifted once an order to set up a committee of administrators to assume the powers of the AIFF Executive Committee has been repealed and the AIFF administration regains full control of the AIFF's daily affairs," the world governing body said in a statement.

As well as losing the U17 Women's World Cup, a lengthy ban would have seen India having to withdraw its clubs from continental competitions, the national team from the 2023 Asian Cup and perhaps its bid to host the 2027 tournament. It would also have been a huge problem for the Indian Super League. The tournament was established in 2014 and became the country's top tier five years later but has struggled since 2020 as games have taken place in a bio-secure bubble all in the coastal state of Goa in front of largely empty stadiums. With the 2022-23 campaign due to kick off in October and clubs being allowed to play home and away, this was always seen as a crucial season to get the ISL back on track, fans back in stadiums and watching on television.

> **"The darkest hour of Indian football is finally over. We sincerely thank FIFA and AFC…for guiding us in such difficult times"**
>
> Acting AIFF general secretary Sunando Dhar

The ban prompted swift action. The Supreme Court disbanded the CoA and the AIFF was back in charge of its own affairs. "The decision [to lift the ban] was taken after FIFA received confirmation that the mandate of the Committee of Administrators that was set up to assume the powers of the AIFF Executive Committee had been terminated," FIFA said in a statement, though hinted that the situation will be monitored to ensure elections are held soon.

It means that the U17 Women's World Cup will go ahead and India is still very much a member of the international football family. There was relief all round. "The darkest hour of Indian football is finally over," was the reaction from acting AIFF general secretary Sunando Dhar. "We sincerely thank FIFA and AFC... for guiding us in such difficult times."

All seems to be amicable after a situation that could have been much worse. The ban may have been embarrassing but with the ISL, the Women's U17 World Cup and plenty more besides going on, there should be enough to keep attention on what happens on the pitch.

"Catastrophic" ...India captain Sunil Chhetri

Palestine

JOHN DUERDEN

Palestine establish themselves as a solid Asian power

Middle Eastern nation reach third consecutive Asian Cup despite huge challenges for team

It is understandable that attention is fully focused on the World Cup, but just over a thousand miles to the northwest of Qatar there is plenty of pride in Palestine at the exploits of their football players. For a national team representing a federation that only became a full member of FIFA in 1998 to qualify for a third successive Asian Cup, as they did in June, is quite an achievement.

Their first appearance came in 2015 when a place at Asia's biggest event was secured in an unconventional way. The AFC Challenge Cup was a competition that existed for eight of Asia's "emerging nations" and, in 2014, Palestine defeated the Philippines 1-0 to lift the trophy and book a place in Australia. Arriving to compete down under, they were well supported by members of the local Palestinian community and were the second team of many others, receiving worldwide recognition and coverage. If there was warmth off the pitch, the introduction to Asian football was tough on it. It started with a 4-0 defeat at the hands of defending champions Japan. Then came a chastening 5-1 loss against neighbours and rivals Jordan, home to a large Palestine population, and it ended with a 2-0 setback to Iraq.

That was the last AFC Challenge Cup before it was scrapped but Palestine kept coming back to the Asian Cup,

Palestine national team...during World Cup qualifying

qualifying by the usual way for the 2019 edition. This time, with the action taking place in the United Arab Emirates, the results were much better. There was an opening game goalless draw with a Syrian team that almost qualified for the 2018 World Cup. Then came a loss to champions Australia and it ended with a draw against Jordan, a far cry from the thrashing received four years earlier.

With just four automatic berths for Asia, qualification for the 2022 World Cup was never going to happen. Just being in with a shout of being one of the 12 teams that reach the final round would have been a success. But that was a long shot after being placed in a preliminary group with Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan, two teams with genuine ambitions of going all the way to Qatar. Palestine performed solidly with ten points from eight games, going unbeaten at home and finishing third behind the big two and above Singapore and Yemen. They were becoming respected opponents in Asia around the continent.

Palestine won all three games in June to top a group containing the Philippines, hosts Mongolia and Yemen

It wasn't enough for a place in the final stage of World Cup qualification but it did give entry into the final round of Asian Cup qualification – the AFC combines the two. Palestine won all three games in June to top a group containing the Philippines, hosts Mongolia and Yemen with young Portuguese-based striker Oday Dabbagh impressing once again. It means a third successive appearance. The hope is, then, to win a game at the next tournament and get out of the group. It is not impossible; only eight of the 24 teams fail to progress, and Palestine have been seeded in pot three.

It would be another fine achievement; especially as Palestine football operates in a challenging environment. There are two domestic leagues, one based in the Gaza Strip and the other in the West Bank with Israel controlling much of the territory in between. The Palestine team is made up of players from those leagues as well as those who have moved overseas and those who are part of the Palestinian diaspora, with players growing up in countries such as Chile and Sweden but eligible to represent the Middle Eastern team.

International games can be more complex than usual then. Coaches and players have complained about the time spent at security checkpoints if they want to go and play international fixtures or if they just want to move between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

"The situation in Palestine makes it difficult for the national team to compete even in Palestine," Susan Shalabi, the vice-president of the PFA said earlier this year. "The squad, more than once, had to postpone and cancel camps because players who play outside could not get an entry permit on time, or players from the south (Gaza) could not travel to the north (West Bank). It's not just the movement of players. The occupation restricts movement to, from, and within Palestine; it restricts the import of sport equipment, the building of pitches and training facilities."

Despite all the odds and the challenges, the national team has become an international symbol of Palestinian identity. That pride will only increase as they challenge more on the Asian stage.

Captain... Abdelatif Bahdari in action during last year's FIFA Arab Cup in Qatar

Star man...Oday Dabbagh plays for Portuguese top-flight side Arouca

Australia

SIMON HILL

Big names light up A-League

Spotlight falls on a host of former English Premier League names ahead of new men's league season in Australia

After a year bedevilled by COVID, teething problems with the new broadcast deal, and a campaign in which almost half the teams were displaced for one reason or another, the A-League (Men's) is hoping for a smoother ride this coming season.

Western United were the surprise champions last season, a success based upon some smart recruitment by new coach John Aloisi. Can lightning strike twice? History suggests not. Only Brisbane Roar and Sydney FC have won consecutive titles in the modern era, and Western have already been dumped out of the renamed Australia Cup by semi-pro Sydney United.

Still, Aloisi has retained much of the squad that saw off Melbourne City in the Grand Final, and has added ex-Socceroo James Troisi to replace the departing Rene Krhin. They will again be competitive, even if the saga surrounding their long-awaited stadium continues to drag on.

Melbourne City will be keen to reassert their authority, and Patrick Kisnorbo has added Callum Talbot from Sydney FC and Richard van der Venne, latterly of RKC Waalwijk. They have lost the influential Connor Metcalfe (St Pauli), Carl Jenkinson (Newcastle Jets) and Rostyn Griffiths (Mumbai City), but overall City look well-equipped to mount another challenge.

Melbourne Victory fell just short last year, and Tony Popovic wasted no time in getting busy in the transfer market. Former Manchester United star Nani is the big-name acquisition, supplemented by keeper Paul Izzo and ex-Socceroos striker Tomi Juric. All three Victorian teams should be in the mix.

Superstar ...Nani left Venezia for Melbourne Victory in the summer

Preview

Point to prove...Jack Rodwell will hope to get his career back on track at Sydney FC

But what of Sydney? Last season, both teams from the Harbour City missed the finals – the first time that has happened since Western Sydney Wanderers were admitted in 2012.

Mark Rudan has had a hectic first full pre-season as coach of the Wanderers, signing no fewer than 16 players. Most controversial of all was the capture of Milos Ninkovic, a legend with Sydney FC, but who couldn't agree terms on a new deal across town.

Rudan has also repatriated Lawrence Thomas and acquired fellow Socceroos Oli Bozanic and Brandon Borrello, along with foreigners Romain Amalfitano, Yeni Ngbakoto and ex-Lyon defender Marcelo. But results will be the only currency this season – Wanderers have been on these sorts of sprees before, and failed.

Sydney FC – for so long the dominant force – fell from grace last season, as time caught up with an ageing team. The Sky Blues returned serve with the Ninkovic departure by grabbing ex-England midfielder Jack Rodwell from the Wanderers. Coach Steve Corica has also added Slovak winger Robert Mak, Spanish defender Diego Caballo and former Nottingham Forest winger Joe Lolley.

Dwight Yorke was the shock choice as new coach of Macarthur, following the departure of Ante Milicic, and the former Manchester United striker has already pulled off a coup by bringing home Daniel Arzani from a disappointing spell in Europe. Still only 23, if Arzani can recapture the form that earned him a spot in Australia's 2018 World Cup squad in Russia, he could be the signing of the season.

Adelaide United have managed to persuade their star man Craig Goodwin to return permanently, and have also repatriated Ben Halloran, which should go some way to filling the gap left by Lachlan Brook's return to the UK and the departure of young guns Mo Toure and Yaya Dukuly to Reims in France.

The league needs a boost after several years of stagnation

Like Melbourne Victory, Brisbane Roar have gone for some star quality by signing former English Premier League striker Charlie Austin. Coach Warren Moon has also persuaded Riku Danzaki to return for another stint down under.

Central Coast Mariners don't really do big-money signings, but the return of Danny Vukovic will be a popular one in Gosford, especially as Mark Birighitti will be a difficult act to replace between the posts. The loss of Kye Rowles, Lewis Miller and Marco Urena however, leave big gaps.

Dugout debut... Dwight Yorke

Newcastle Jets seem to have recruited well on the back of last year's disappointment when they found consistency elusive. Attacking midfielder Daniel Penha has gone, but Reno Piscopo and Brandon O'Neill are solid recruits, while Jaushua Sotirio and Trent Buhagiar should ensure No.9 Beka Mikeltadze doesn't shoulder the goalscoring burden alone this season.

Perth Glory were first-time wooden spooners last season. Ruben Zadkovich has gone for a mixture of A-League proven players (Mustafa Amini and John Koutroumbis), and unknown foreigners (Ben Azubel and Aaron McEneff). But again, much will depend upon the goals of Bruno Fornaroli.

Wellington Phoenix will be playing back in New Zealand full-time for the first time since the pandemic struck in early 2020. The Nix are regularly written off in pre-season, and the loss of Gary Hooper, Gael Sandoval, Piscopo and Sotirio suggest another season of struggle. But Ufuk Talay is arguably the league's smartest coach, and while the name of Bulgarian attacker Bozhidar Kraev might not mean much at the moment, Talay has a habit of unearthing overseas gems.

Generally, the league needs a boost after several years of stagnation. The mooted National Second Division remains elusive, but it is only part of the solution for a league that has struggled to recapture its heyday of the mid-2010s. As ever, the season shapes as being vitally important in terms of getting the numbers of fans and viewers tracking in an upward direction.

Liechtenstein

STEVE MENARY

Vaduz defy the odds

Liechtenstein's only full-time club becomes the principality's first team to play in the group stages of a UEFA competition after progressing through the Conference League qualifiers

Scenic...Vaduz will host matches at the Rheinpark Stadion

The second season of the UEFA Europa Conference League has again offered a handful of opportunities to clubs from smaller European countries, and Vaduz are the first side from Liechtenstein to play in the group stages of European competition.

For a club that had only managed to win through to the third qualifying round of European tournaments just twice in 27 appearances previously, becoming the only second-tier club to play in the group stages of UEFA competition this season was a sensation.

"We are a small club, achieving this goal is already extraordinary," says Francesco Pargalia, Vaduz's assistant coach. "We tried and succeeded, but surely it would have been unreal just to think about it in July."

That was when Vaduz, the only full-time club in a country of just 38,000 people, took on Slovenia's Koper and won 2-1. In the next round, a sensational 4-2 win away to Konyaspor in front of 23,000 fans in Turkey sealed a place in the play-offs against Austrian giants Rapid Vienna.

On their only previous appearances in the third qualifying round – against Switzerland's Thun in 2015-16 and Germany's Eintracht Frankfurt three years ago – Vaduz stumbled.

After a poor start in the Swiss Challenge League after relegation from the Swiss Super League last season, the auguries were not good. Pargalia explains: "It was very difficult to move from one competition to another in a few days. We don't have a shortlist of 30 players, and nervous energy was lacking at times in Challenge League matches. The guys always tried with the right commitment, but something didn't work."

Despite being winless domestically, Alessandro Mangiarratti's side won 1-0 in Vienna in front of a 15,000-crowd courtesy of Tunahan Cicek's strike to seal a 2-1 triumph on aggregate.

Qualification is a major success for the former AC Bellinzona defender Mangiarratti, who had been unable to avoid relegation at Vaduz after taking over last Christmas. The club have spent five seasons in the Super League since their debut in 2007-08 but, under an agreement with Swiss clubs, cannot qualify for a place in European competition.

Though often a low-key event, the Liechtenstein Cup is the only route into Europe for Vaduz and the principality's six other clubs, who also play at various levels of the Swiss league.

Vaduz made their European bow in 1992-93, when the winners were offered a place in the old Cup Winners' Cup. When that competition was scrapped at the turn of the millennium, a place in the Europa League has been the prize. As Liechtenstein's only full-time club, Vaduz dominate. Shortly after their European success, they cruised into this season's quarter-finals with an 18-0 win. Since 1998 they have only missed out on the tournament once: in 2011-12, when USV Eschen Mauren triumphed on penalties.

> "We are a small club, achieving this goal is already extraordinary"
>
> Francesco Pargalia, Vaduz assistant coach

USV's hero that night was goalkeeper Benji Buchel, who is now one of only a handful of local players in the Vaduz side. Buchel is also the national team goalkeeper and will captain Vaduz in their Group E fixtures against Dutch club AZ, Dnipro-1 of Ukraine and Cypriot champions Apollon Limassol.

Pargalia is phlegmatic about their chances, saying: "We were a second-level team yesterday and we will be tomorrow too. We will always strive and prepare, but already beating Koper has been a feat, we'll see what happens."

After three successive victories away from home in the qualifiers, Vaduz will certainly not be taken for granted on their travels in the group stage.

Against the odds... Vaduz came out of the pot in Group E

ESM XI
EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	5
Yann Sommer (B. M'Gladbach)	2
Diogo Costa (Porto)	1
Gregor Kobel (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Mike Maignan (Milan)	1
Rui Patricio (Roma)	1
Geronimo Rulli (Villarreal)	1

DEFENDERS

Benjamin Pavard (Bayern Munich)	6
David Alaba (Real Madrid)	5
Joao Cancelo (Manchester City)	3
Eric Dier (Tottenham Hotspur)	3
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	3
Pau Torres (Villarreal)	3
Gabriel (Arsenal)	2
Roger Ibanez (Roma)	2
Kim Min-jae (Napoli)	2
Lisandro Martinez (Manchester United)	2
Toby Alderweireld (Royal Antwerp)	1
Marc Cucurella (Chelsea)	1
Danilo (Juventus)	1
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	1
Oscar De Marcos (Athletic Bilbao)	1
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	1
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	1
Lucas Hernandez (Bayern Munich)	1
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	1
Reece James (Chelsea)	1
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	1
Alfonso Pedraza (Villarreal)	1
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	1
William Saliba (Arsenal)	1
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	1
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	6
Luka Modric (Real Madrid)	4
Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City)	3
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	3
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	3
Pedri (Barcelona)	3
Ilkay Gundogan (Manchester City)	2
Aurelien Tchouameni (Real Madrid)	2
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	1
Enzo Fernandez (Benfica)	1
Teun Koopmeiners (Atalanta)	1
Toni Kroos (Real Madrid)	1
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	1
Vitinha (PSG)	1

FORWARDS

Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	11
Neymar (PSG)	6
Aleksandar Mitrovic (Fulham)	4
Karim Benzema (Real Madrid)	3
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	3
Ousmane Dembele (Barcelona)	2
Gabriel Jesus (Arsenal)	2
Khvicha Kvaratskhelia (Napoli)	2
Sadio Mane (Bayern Munich)	2
Dusan Vlahovic (Juventus)	2
Sheraldo Becker (Union Berlin)	1
Gabriel Martinelli (Arsenal)	1
Kylian Mbappe (PSG)	1
Rafa Silva (Benfica)	1

VOTES CAST THIS MONTH BY ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *TIPS Bladet* (Denmark), *ElfVoetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

OCTOBER 1-OCTOBER 22

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

The Classics

Some of the biggest showdowns in European club football take place in October. In Germany, it's *Der Klassiker* between Borussia Dortmund and Bayern Munich on October 8, while on the same day there's a must-watch game in Italy as Milan go head-to-head with Juventus. The following weekend sees both France's *Le Classique*, between Paris Saint-Germain and Marseille, and Spain's *El Clasico,* as Real Madrid take on rivals Barcelona at the Bernabeu, while Liverpool also host English champions Manchester City in the Premier League.

***El Clasico*...Real Madrid and Barca**

Testing times for Arsenal

October promises to be a defining month for Arsenal, starting with a North London derby at home to Tottenham Hotspur, followed by a heavyweight clash in the Premier League against Liverpool – not to mention a packed Europa League calendar, including their rescheduled fixture with PSV. Time for Mikel Arteta to prove himself.

In form... Arsenal started the season well

Racing through Europe

By the end of October, we'll have a much better idea of who'll be competing for the major UEFA trophies, with three matchdays of the Champions League, Europa League and Conference League taking place during the month (with the final matchday set for early November). The Qatar World Cup means that the group phase has been unusually congested this season, and could produce some upsets. *(For September's results, turn to pages 96-97)*

MLS crunch time

The 2022 Major League Soccer regular season concludes on October 9, with Philadelphia Union and Los Angeles FC the likeliest contenders to top the Eastern and Western Conferences, respectively, at the time of writing. The race for the MLS Cup begins soon after, with play-in rounds kicking off on October 15, and the two-legged Conference semi-finals on the 19th.

5 unmissable matches

- **Real Madrid v Shakhtar, October 5**
  These two meet in the group stage for the third year in a row, with their last four meetings averaging almost four goals a game, and Shakhtar doing the double over Madrid in 2020-21.
- **England Women v United States Women, October 7**
  Off the back of England's European Championship success, this Wembley clash sold out in record time. A vital test for Sarina Wiegman's side against the world champions.

Back at Wembley...the Lionesses return to the venue which staged their Euro 2022 victory

- **Rangers v Liverpool, October 12**
  The two sides meet for the first time ever in a competitive fixture on October 4 at Anfield, but the atmosphere is likely to be even more explosive for this all-British Champions League clash at Ibrox.
- **Bodo/Glimt v Arsenal, October 13**
  Just a week short of the one-year anniversary of Bodo/Glimt's 6-1 demolition of Roma in last season's Europa Conference League, the Norwegian side will be fully geared up for another huge shock. Arsenal players can expect a frosty reception in close-to-freezing temperatures.
- **Milan v Monza, October 22**
  Monza owners Silvio Berlusconi and Adriano Galliani return to the San Siro to take on their old club in an intriguing Italian league clash. A victory for the ambitious Serie A newcomers would see their season explode into life.

CAF Champions League

The two-legged second-round qualifiers for the 2022-23 African Champions League take place from October 7 to October 16. Morocco's Wydad Casablanca, last season's champions, are among the teams fighting for a place in the group stage, as are last season's finalists and record ten-time winners Al Ahly of Egypt. The group stage will begin in February 2023.

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PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-2023

ARSENAL

GOALKEEPERS
1 Aaron **RAMSDALE** (24) 14.05.98
30 Matt **TURNER** (USA) (28) 24.06.94
31 Karl **HEIN** (Est) (20) 13.04.02

DEFENDERS
3 Kieran **TIERNEY** (Sco) (25) 05.06.97
4 Ben **WHITE** (24) 08.10.97
6 **GABRIEL** (Bra) (24) 19.12.97
12 William **SALIBA** (Fra) (21) 24.03.01
16 Rob **HOLDING** (27) 20.09.95
17 **CEDRIC** Soares (Por) (31) 31.08.91
18 Takehiro **TOMIYASU** (Jpn) (23) 05.11.98
35 Oleksandr **ZINCHENKO** (Ukr) (25) 15.12.96

MIDFIELDERS
5 Thomas **PARTEY** (Gha) (29) 13.06.93
7 Bukayo **SAKA** (21) 05.09.01
8 Martin **ODEGAARD** (Nor) (23) 17.12.98
10 Emile **SMITH ROWE** (22) 28.07.00
21 Fabio **VIEIRA** (Por) (22) 30.05.00
23 Albert Sambi **LOKONGA** (Bel) (22) 22.10.99
25 Mohamed **ELNENY** (Egy) (30) 11.07.92
34 Granit **XHAKA** (Sui) (30) 27.09.92

FORWARDS
9 **GABRIEL JESUS** (Bra) (25) 03.04.97
11 Gabriel **MARTINELLI** (Bra) (21) 18.06.01
14 Eddie **NKETIAH** (23) 30.05.99
24 Reiss **NELSON** (22) 10.12.99
27 **MARQUINHOS** (Bra) (19) 07.04.03

MANAGER
Mikel **ARTETA** (Spa) (40) 26.03.82

ASTON VILLA

GOALKEEPERS
1 Emiliano **MARTINEZ** (Arg) (30) 02.09.92
12 Jed **STEER** (30) 23.09.92
25 Robin **OLSEN** (Swe) (32) 08.01.90

DEFENDERS
2 Matty **CASH** (Pol) (25) 07.08.97
3 **DIEGO CARLOS** (Bra) (29) 15.03.93
4 Ezri **KONSA** (24) 23.10.97
5 Tyrone **MINGS** (29) 13.03.93
16 Calum **CHAMBERS** (27) 20.01.95
17 Ludwig **AUGUSTINSSON** (Swe) (28) 21.04.94
18 Ashley **YOUNG** (37) 09.07.85
20 Jan **BEDNAREK** (Pol) (26) 12.04.96
24 Frederic **GUILBERT** (Fra) (27) 24.12.94
27 Lucas **DIGNE** (Fra) (29) 20.07.93

MIDFIELDERS
6 **DOUGLAS LUIZ** (Bra) (24) 09.05.98
7 John **McGINN** (Sco) (27) 18.10.94
8 Morgan **SANSON** (Fra) (28) 18.08.94
10 Emiliano **BUENDIA** (Arg) (25) 25.12.96
19 Marvelous **NAKAMBA** (Zim) (28) 19.01.94
23 Philippe **COUTINHO** (Bra) (30) 12.06.92
32 Leander **DENDONCKER** (Bel) (27) 15.04.95
41 Jacob **RAMSEY** (21) 28.05.01
44 Boubacar **KAMARA** (Fra) (22) 23.11.99

FORWARDS
9 Danny **INGS** (30) 23.07.92
11 Ollie **WATKINS** (26) 30.12.95
31 Leon **BAILEY** (Jam) (25) 09.08.97
35 Cameron **ARCHER** (20) 09.12.01

MANAGER
Steven **GERRARD** (42) 30.05.80

BOURNEMOUTH

GOALKEEPERS
1 Mark **TRAVERS** (Ire) (23) 18.05.99
13 **NETO** (Bra) (33) 19.07.89
40 Will **DENNIS** (22) 10.07.00

DEFENDERS
2 Ryan **FREDERICKS** (29) 10.10.92
3 Jack **STEPHENS** (28) 27.01.94
5 Lloyd **KELLY** (23) 06.10.98
6 Chris **MEPHAM** (Wal) (24) 05.11.97
15 Adam **SMITH** (31) 29.04.91
17 Jack **STACEY** (26) 06.04.96
23 James **HILL** (20) 10.01.02
25 Marcos **SENESI** (Arg) (25) 10.05.97
33 Jordan **ZEMURA** (Zim) (22) 14.11.99

MIDFIELDERS
4 Lewis **COOK** (25) 03.02.97
7 David **BROOKS** (Wal) (25) 08.07.97
8 Jefferson **LERMA** (Col) (27) 25.10.94
10 Ryan **CHRISTIE** (Sco) (27) 22.02.95
11 Emiliano **MARCONDES** (Den) (27) 09.03.95
14 Joe **ROTHWELL** (27) 11.01.95
16 Marcus **TAVERNIER** (23) 22.03.99
19 Junior **STANISLAS** (32) 26.11.89
22 Ben **PEARSON** (27) 04.01.95
29 Philip **BILLING** (Den) (26) 11.06.96

FORWARDS
9 Dominic **SOLANKE** (25) 14.09.97
18 Jamal **LOWE** (Jam) (28) 21.07.94
20 Siriki **DEMBELE** (Sco) (26) 07.09.96
21 Kieffer **MOORE** (Wal) (30) 08.08.92
32 Jaidon **ANTHONY** (22) 01.12.99

MANAGER
Gary **O'NEIL** (*Interim*) (39) 18.05.83

BRENTFORD

GOALKEEPERS
1 David **RAYA** (Spa) (27) 15.09.95
22 Thomas **STRAKOSHA** (Alb) (27) 19.03.95
34 Matthew **COX** (19) 02.05.03

DEFENDERS
2 Aaron **HICKEY** (Sco) (20) 10.06.02
3 Rico **HENRY** (25) 08.07.97
4 Charlie **GOODE** (27) 03.08.95
5 Ethan **PINNOCK** (Jam) (29) 29.05.93
13 Mathias **JORGENSEN** (Den) (32) 23.04.90
16 Ben **MEE** (33) 21.09.89
18 Pontus **JANSSON** (Swe) (31) 13.02.91
20 Kristoffer **AJER** (Nor) (24) 17.04.98
30 Mads **ROERSLEV** (Den) (23) 24.06.99

MIDFIELDERS
6 Christian **NORGAARD** (Den) (28) 10.03.94
7 Sergi **CANOS** (Spa) (25) 02.02.97
8 Mathias **JENSEN** (Den) (26) 01.01.96
10 Joshua **DASILVA** (23) 23.10.98
15 Frank **ONYEKA** (Nga) (24) 01.01.98
24 Mikkel **DAMSGAARD** (Den) (22) 03.07.00
26 Shandon **BAPTISTE** (Grn) (24) 08.04.98
27 Vitaly **JANELT** (Ger) (24) 10.05.98

FORWARDS
11 Yoane **WISSA** (Cod) (26) 03.09.96
14 Saman **GHODDOS** (Ira) (29) 06.09.93
17 Ivan **TONEY** (26) 16.03.96
19 Bryan **MBEUMO** (Cmr) (23) 07.08.99
23 Keane **LEWIS-POTTER** (21) 22.02.01

MANAGER
Thomas **FRANK** (Den) (48) 09.10.73

BRIGHTON

GOALKEEPERS
1 Robert **SANCHEZ** (Spa) (24) 18.11.97
23 Jason **STEELE** (32) 18.08.90
38 Thomas **McGILL** (22) 25.03.00

DEFENDERS
2 Tariq **LAMPTEY** (Gha) (22) 30.09.00
4 Adam **WEBSTER** (27) 04.01.95
5 Lewis **DUNK** (30) 21.11.91
6 Levi **COLWILL** (19) 26.02.03
29 Jan Paul **VAN HECKE** (Ned) (22) 08.06.00
30 Pervis **ESTUPINAN** (Ecu) (24) 21.01.98
34 Joel **VELTMAN** (Ned) (30) 15.01.92

MIDFIELDERS
7 Solly **MARCH** (28) 20.07.94
8 Enock **MWEPU** (Zam) (24) 01.01.98
10 Alexis **MAC ALLISTER** (Arg) (23) 24.12.98
13 Pascal **GROSS** (Ger) (31) 15.06.91
14 Adam **LALLANA** (34) 10.05.88
15 Jakub **MODER** (Pol) (23) 07.04.99
17 Steven **ALZATE** (Col) (24) 08.09.98
25 Moises **CAICEDO** (Ecu) (20) 02.11.01
27 Billy **GILMOUR** (Sco) (21) 11.06.01

FORWARDS
11 Leandro **TROSSARD** (Bel) (27) 04.12.94
18 Danny **WELBECK** (31) 26.11.90
19 Jeremy **SARMIENTO** (Ecu) (20) 16.06.02
20 Julio **ENCISO** (Par) (18) 23.01.04
21 Deniz **UNDAV** (Ger) (26) 19.07.96
22 Kaoru **MITOMA** (Jpn) (25) 20.05.97

MANAGER
Vacant

CHELSEA

GOALKEEPERS
1 **KEPA** Arrizabalaga (Spa) (27) 03.10.94
13 Marcus **BETTINELLI** (30) 24.05.92
16 Edouard **MENDY** (Sen) (30) 01.03.92

DEFENDERS
6 **THIAGO SILVA** (Bra) (38) 22.09.84
14 Trevoh **CHALOBAH** (23) 05.07.99
21 Ben **CHILWELL** (25) 21.12.96
24 Reece **JAMES** (22) 08.12.99
26 Kalidou **KOULIBALY** (Sen) (31) 20.06.91
28 Cesar **AZPILICUETA** (Spa) (33) 28.08.89
32 Marc **CUCURELLA** (Spa) (24) 22.07.98
33 Wesley **FOFANA** (Fra) (21) 17.12.00

MIDFIELDERS
5 **JORGINHO** (Ita) (30) 20.12.91
7 N'Golo **KANTE** (Fra) (31) 29.03.91
8 Mateo **KOVACIC** (Cro) (28) 06.05.94
12 Ruben **LOFTUS-CHEEK** (26) 23.01.96
19 Mason **MOUNT** (23) 10.01.99
20 Denis **ZAKARIA** (Sui) (25) 20.11.96
23 Conor **GALLAGHER** (22) 06.02.00
30 Carney **CHUKWUEMEKA** (18) 20.10.03

FORWARDS
9 Pierre-Emerick **AUBAMEYANG** (Gab) (33) 18.06.89
10 Christian **PULISIC** (USA) (24) 18.09.98
17 Raheem **STERLING** (27) 08.12.94
18 Armando **BROJA** (Alb) (21) 10.09.01
22 Hakim **ZIYECH** (Mar) (29) 19.03.93
29 Kai **HAVERTZ** (Ger) (23) 11.06.99

MANAGER
Graham **POTTER** (47) 20.05.75

CRYSTAL PALACE

GOALKEEPERS
1 Jack **BUTLAND** (29) 10.03.93
13 Vicente **GUAITA** (Spa) (35) 10.01.87
21 Sam **JOHNSTONE** (29) 25.03.93
41 Joe **WHITWORTH** (18) 29.02.04

DEFENDERS
2 Joel **WARD** (32) 29.10.89
3 Tyrick **MITCHELL** (23) 01.09.99
5 James **TOMKINS** (33) 29.03.89
6 Marc **GUEHI** (22) 13.07.00
16 Joachim **ANDERSEN** (Den) (26) 31.05.96
17 Nathaniel **CLYNE** (31) 05.04.91
26 Chris **RICHARDS** (USA) (22) 28.03.00
36 Nathan **FERGUSON** (21) 06.10.00

MIDFIELDERS
4 Luka **MILIVOJEVIC** (Srb) (31) 07.04.91
7 Michael **OLISE** (Fra) (20) 12.12.01
10 Eberechi **EZE** (24) 29.06.98
15 Jeffrey **SCHLUPP** (Gha) (29) 23.12.92
18 James **McARTHUR** (Sco) (34) 07.10.87
19 Will **HUGHES** (27) 17.04.95
23 Malcolm **EBIOWEI** (19) 04.09.03
28 Cheick **DOUCOURE** (Mli) (22) 08.01.00
44 Jairo **RIEDEWALD** (Ned) (26) 09.09.96
45 Jack **WELLS-MORRISON** (18) 18.02.04
55 Killian **PHILLIPS** (Ire) (20) 30.03.02
78 Kaden **RODNEY** (17) 07.10.04

FORWARDS
9 Jordan **AYEW** (Gha) (31) 11.09.91
11 Wilfried **ZAHA** (Civ) (29) 10.11.92
14 Jean-Philippe **MATETA** (Fra) (25) 28.06.97
22 Odsonne **EDOUARD** (Fra) (24) 16.01.98

MANAGER
Patrick **VIEIRA** (Fra) (46) 23.06.76

EVERTON

GOALKEEPERS
1 Jordan **PICKFORD** (28) 07.03.94
15 Asmir **BEGOVIC** (Bih) (35) 20.06.87
31 Andy **LONERGAN** (38) 19.10.83

DEFENDERS
2 James **TARKOWSKI** (29) 19.11.92
3 Nathan **PATTERSON** (Sco) (20) 16.10.01
4 Mason **HOLGATE** (25) 22.10.96
5 Michael **KEANE** (29) 11.01.93
13 Yerry **MINA** (Col) (28) 23.09.94
19 Vitaliy **MYKOLENKO** (Ukr) (23) 29.05.99
22 Ben **GODFREY** (24) 15.01.98
23 Seamus **COLEMAN** (Ire) (33) 11.10.88
29 Ruben **VINAGRE** (Por) (23) 09.04.99
30 Conor **COADY** (29) 25.02.93

MIDFIELDERS
6 **ALLAN** (Bra) (31) 08.01.91
8 Amadou **ONANA** (Bel) (21) 16.08.01
16 Abdoulaye **DOUCOURE** (Mli) (29) 01.01.93
17 Alex **IWOBI** (Nga) (26) 03.05.96
26 Tom **DAVIES** (24) 30.06.98
27 Idrissa **GUEYE** (Sen) (33) 26.09.89
37 James **GARNER** (21) 13.03.01

FORWARDS
7 Dwight **McNEIL** (22) 22.11.99
9 Dominic **CALVERT-LEWIN** (25) 16.03.97
10 Anthony **GORDON** (21) 24.02.01
11 Demarai **GRAY** (26) 28.06.96
14 Andros **TOWNSEND** (31) 16.07.91
20 Neal **MAUPAY** (Fra) (26) 14.08.96
33 Salomon **RONDON** (Ven) (33) 16.09.89

MANAGER
Frank **LAMPARD** (44) 20.06.78

FULHAM

GOALKEEPERS
1 Marek **RODAK** (Svk) (25) 13.12.96
17 Bernd **LENO** (Ger) (30) 04.03.92

DEFENDERS
2 Kenny **TETE** (Ned) (26) 09.10.95
3 Layvin **KURZAWA** (Fra) (30) 04.09.92
4 Tosin **ADARABIOYO** (25) 24.09.97
5 Shane **DUFFY** (Ire) (30) 01.01.92
13 Tim **REAM** (USA) (34) 05.10.87
27 Kevin **MBABU** (Sui) (27) 19.04.95
31 Issa **DIOP** (Fra) (25) 09.01.97
33 Antonee **ROBINSON** (USA) (25) 08.08.97

MIDFIELDERS
6 Harrison **REED** (27) 27.01.95
8 Harry **WILSON** (Wal) (25) 22.03.97
10 Tom **CAIRNEY** (Sco) (31) 20.01.91
12 Nathaniel **CHALOBAH** (27) 12.12.94
18 **ANDREAS PEREIRA** (Bra) (26) 01.01.96
20 **WILLIAN** (Bra) (34) 09.08.88
26 Joao **PALHINHA** (Por) (27) 09.07.95

FORWARDS
7 Neeskens **KEBANO** (Cod) (30) 10.03.92
9 Aleksandar **MITROVIC** (Srb) (28) 16.09.94
11 Manor **SOLOMON** (Isr) (23) 24.07.99
14 Bobby **DECORDOVA-REID** (Jam) (29) 02.02.93
21 Daniel **JAMES** (Wal) (24) 10.11.97
30 **CARLOS VINICIUS** (Bra) (27) 25.03.95

MANAGER
Marco **SILVA** (Por) (45) 12.07.77

LEEDS UNITED

GOALKEEPERS
1 Illan **MESLIER** (Fra) (22) 02.03.00
13 Kristoffer **KLAESSON** (Nor) (21) 27.11.00
22 Joel **ROBLES** (Spa) (32) 17.06.90

DEFENDERS
2 Luke **AYLING** (31) 25.08.91
3 Junior **FIRPO** (Spa) (26) 22.08.96
5 Robin **KOCH** (Ger) (26) 17.07.96
6 Liam **COOPER** (Sco) (31) 30.08.91
14 Diego **LLORENTE** (Spa) (29) 16.08.93
15 Stuart **DALLAS** (Nir) (31) 19.04.91
21 Pascal **STRUIJK** (Ned) (23) 11.08.99
25 Rasmus **KRISTENSEN** (Den) (25) 11.07.97
33 Leo **HJELDE** (Nor) (19) 26.08.03
37 Cody **DRAMEH** (20) 08.12.01

MIDFIELDERS
4 Adam **FORSHAW** (30) 08.10.91
7 Brenden **AARONSON** (USA) (21) 22.10.00
8 Marc **ROCA** (Spa) (25) 26.11.96
10 Crysencio **SUMMERVILLE** (Ned) (20) 30.10.01
11 Jack **HARRISON** (25) 20.11.96
12 Tyler **ADAMS** (USA) (23) 14.02.99
18 Darko **GYABI** (18) 18.02.04
43 Mateusz **KLICH** (Pol) (32) 13.06.90
63 Archie **GRAY** (16) 12.03.06

FORWARDS
9 Patrick **BAMFORD** (29) 05.09.93
19 **RODRIGO** (Spa) (31) 06.03.91
23 Luis **SINISTERRA** (Col) (23) 17.06.99
29 Wilfried **GNONTO** (Ita) (18) 05.11.03
30 Joe **GELHARDT** (20) 04.05.02
42 Sam **GREENWOOD** (20) 26.01.02

MANAGER
Jesse **MARSCH** (USA) (48) 08.11.73

LEICESTER CITY

GOALKEEPERS
1 Danny **WARD** (Wal) (29) 22.06.93
12 Alex **SMITHIES** (32) 05.03.90
31 Daniel **IVERSEN** (Den) (25) 19.07.97

DEFENDERS
2 James **JUSTIN** (24) 23.02.98
3 Wout **FAES** (Bel) (24) 03.04.98
4 Caglar **SOYUNCU** (Tur) (26) 23.05.96
5 Ryan **BERTRAND** (33) 05.08.89
6 Jonny **EVANS** (Nir) (34) 03.01.88
18 Daniel **AMARTEY** (Gha) (27) 21.12.94
21 Ricardo **PEREIRA** (Por) (28) 06.10.93
23 Jannik **VESTERGAARD** (Den) (30) 03.08.92
27 Timothy **CASTAGNE** (Bel) (26) 05.12.95
33 Luke **THOMAS** (21) 10.06.01

MIDFIELDERS
7 Harvey **BARNES** (24) 09.12.97
8 Youri **TIELEMANS** (Bel) (25) 07.05.97
10 James **MADDISON** (25) 23.11.96
11 Marc **ALBRIGHTON** (32) 18.11.89
22 Kiernan **DEWSBURY-HALL** (24) 06.09.98
24 Nampalys **MENDY** (Sen) (30) 23.06.92
25 Wilfred **NDIDI** (Nga) (25) 16.12.96
26 Dennis **PRAET** (Bel) (28) 14.05.94
42 Boubakary **SOUMARE** (Fra) (23) 27.02.99

FORWARDS
9 Jamie **VARDY** (35) 11.01.87
14 Kelechi **IHEANACHO** (Nga) (25) 03.10.96
17 Ayoze **PEREZ** (Spa) (29) 29.07.93
20 Patson **DAKA** (Zam) (23) 09.10.98

MANAGER
Brendan **RODGERS** (Nir) (49) 26.01.73

LIVERPOOL

GOALKEEPERS
1 **ALISSON** (Bra) (29) 02.10.92
13 **ADRIAN** (Spa) (35) 03.01.87
62 Caoimhin **KELLEHER** (Ire) (23) 23.11.98

DEFENDERS
2 Joe **GOMEZ** (25) 23.05.97
4 Virgil **VAN DIJK** (Ned) (31) 08.07.91
5 Ibrahima **KONATE** (Fra) (23) 25.05.99
21 Kostas **TSIMIKAS** (Gre) (26) 12.05.96
22 Calvin **RAMSAY** (Sco) (19) 31.07.03
26 Andy **ROBERTSON** (Sco) (28) 11.03.94
32 Joel **MATIP** (Cmr) (31) 08.08.91
47 Nathaniel **PHILLIPS** (25) 21.03.97
66 Trent **ALEXANDER-ARNOLD** (23) 07.10.98

MIDFIELDERS
3 **FABINHO** (Bra) (28) 23.10.93
6 **THIAGO** (Spa) (31) 11.04.91
7 James **MILNER** (36) 04.01.86
8 Naby **KEITA** (Gui) (27) 10.02.95
14 Jordan **HENDERSON** (32) 17.06.90
15 Alex **OXLADE-CHAMBERLAIN** (29) 15.08.93
17 Curtis **JONES** (21) 30.01.01
19 Harvey **ELLIOTT** (19) 04.04.03
28 Fabio **CARVALHO** (Por) (20) 30.08.02
29 **ARTHUR** (Bra) (26) 12.08.96

FORWARDS
9 Roberto **FIRMINO** (Bra) (30) 02.10.91
11 Mohamed **SALAH** (Egy) (30) 15.06.92
20 Diogo **JOTA** (Por) (25) 04.12.96
23 Luis **DIAZ** (Col) (25) 13.01.97
27 Darwin **NUNEZ** (Uru) (23) 24.06.99

MANAGER
Jurgen **KLOPP** (Ger) (55) 16.06.67

MANCHESTER CITY

GOALKEEPERS
18 Stefan **ORTEGA** (Ger) (29) 06.11.92
31 **EDERSON** (Bra) (29) 17.08.93
33 Scott **CARSON** (37) 03.09.85

DEFENDERS
2 Kyle **WALKER** (32) 28.05.90
3 Ruben **DIAS** (Por) (25) 14.05.97
5 John **STONES** (28) 28.05.94
6 Nathan **AKE** (Ned) (27) 18.02.95
7 Joao **CANCELO** (Por) (28) 27.05.94
14 Aymeric **LAPORTE** (Spa) (28) 27.05.94
21 Sergio **GOMEZ** (Spa) (22) 04.09.00
25 Manuel **AKANJI** (Sui) (27) 19.07.95

MIDFIELDERS
4 Kalvin **PHILLIPS** (26) 02.12.95
8 Ilkay **GUNDOGAN** (Ger) (31) 24.10.90
10 Jack **GREALISH** (27) 10.09.95
16 **RODRI** (Spa) (26) 22.06.96
17 Kevin **DE BRUYNE** (Bel) (31) 28.06.91
20 **BERNARDO SILVA** (Por) (28) 10.08.94
47 Phil **FODEN** (22) 28.05.00
80 Cole **PALMER** (20) 06.05.02

FORWARDS
9 Erling **HAALAND** (Nor) (22) 21.07.00
19 Julian **ALVAREZ** (Arg) (22) 31.01.00
26 Riyad **MAHREZ** (Alg) (31) 21.02.91

MANAGER
Pep **GUARDIOLA** (Spa) (51) 18.01.71

MANCHESTER UTD

GOALKEEPERS
1 David **DE GEA** (Spa) (31) 07.11.90
22 Tom **HEATON** (36) 15.04.86
31 Martin **DUBRAVKA** (Svk) (33) 15.01.89

DEFENDERS
2 Victor **LINDELOF** (Swe) (28) 17.07.94
4 Phil **JONES** (30) 21.02.92
5 Harry **MAGUIRE** (29) 05.03.93
6 Lisandro **MARTINEZ** (Arg) (24) 18.01.98
12 Tyrell **MALACIA** (Ned) (23) 17.08.99
19 Raphael **VARANE** (Fra) (29) 25.04.93
20 Diogo **DALOT** (Por) (23) 18.03.99
23 Luke **SHAW** (27) 12.07.95
29 Aaron **WAN-BISSAKA** (24) 26.11.97
33 Brandon **WILLIAMS** (22) 03.09.00
38 Axel **TUANZEBE** (24) 14.11.97
43 Teden **MENGI** (20) 30.04.02

MIDFIELDERS
8 Bruno **FERNANDES** (Por) (28) 08.09.94
14 Christian **ERIKSEN** (Den) (30) 14.02.92
17 **FRED** (Bra) (29) 05.03.93
18 **CASEMIRO** (Bra) (30) 23.02.92
28 Facundo **PELLISTRI** (Uru) (20) 20.12.01
34 Donny **VAN DE BEEK** (Ned) (25) 18.04.97
39 Scott **McTOMINAY** (Sco) (25) 08.12.96

FORWARDS
7 Cristiano **RONALDO** (Por) (37) 05.02.85
9 Anthony **MARTIAL** (Fra) (26) 05.12.95
10 Marcus **RASHFORD** (24) 31.10.97
11 Mason **GREENWOOD** (20) 01.10.01
21 **ANTONY** (Bra) (22) 24.02.00
25 Jadon **SANCHO** (22) 25.03.00
36 Anthony **ELANGA** (Swe) (20) 27.04.02
47 Shola **SHORETIRE** (18) 02.02.04
49 Alejandro **GARNACHO** (Arg) (18) 01.07.04

MANAGER
Erik **TEN HAG** (Ned) (52) 02.02.70

NEWCASTLE UTD

GOALKEEPERS
18 Loris **KARIUS** (Ger) (29) 22.06.93
22 Nick **POPE** (30) 19.04.92
26 Karl **DARLOW** (31) 08.10.90
29 Mark **GILLESPIE** (30) 27.03.92

DEFENDERS
2 Kieran **TRIPPIER** (32) 19.09.90
3 Paul **DUMMETT** (Wal) (31) 26.09.91
4 Sven **BOTMAN** (Ned) (22) 12.01.00
5 Fabian **SCHAR** (Sui) (30) 20.12.91
6 Jamaal **LASCELLES** (28) 11.11.93
12 Jamal **LEWIS** (Nir) (24) 25.01.98
13 Matt **TARGETT** (27) 18.09.95
17 Emil **KRAFTH** (Swe) (28) 02.08.94
19 Javier **MANQUILLO** (Spa) (28) 05.05.94
33 Dan **BURN** (30) 09.05.92

MIDFIELDERS
7 **JOELINTON** (Bra) (26) 14.08.96
8 Jonjo **SHELVEY** (30) 27.02.92
11 Matt **RITCHIE** (Sco) (33) 10.09.89
21 Ryan **FRASER** (Sco) (28) 24.02.94
23 Jacob **MURPHY** (27) 24.02.95
24 Miguel **ALMIRON** (Par) (28) 10.02.94
28 Joe **WILLOCK** (23) 20.08.99
32 Elliot **ANDERSON** (Sco) (19) 06.11.02
36 Sean **LONGSTAFF** (24) 30.10.97
39 **BRUNO GUIMARAES** (Bra) (24) 16.11.97

FORWARDS
9 Callum **WILSON** (30) 27.02.92
10 Allan **SAINT-MAXIMIN** (Fra) (25) 12.03.97
14 Alexander **ISAK** (Swe) (23) 21.09.99
20 Chris **WOOD** (Nzl) (30) 07.12.91

MANAGER
Eddie **HOWE** (44) 29.11.77

NOTT'M FOREST

GOALKEEPERS
1 Dean **HENDERSON** (25) 12.03.97
12 Jordan **SMITH** (27) 08.12.94
13 Wayne **HENNESSEY** (Wal) (35) 24.01.87

DEFENDERS
2 Giulian **BIANCONE** (Fra) (22) 31.03.00
3 Steve **COOK** (31) 19.04.91
4 Joe **WORRALL** (25) 10.01.97
6 Loic **MBE SOH** (Fra) (21) 13.06.01
7 Neco **WILLIAMS** (Wal) (21) 13.04.01
15 Harry **TOFFOLO** (27) 19.08.95
19 Moussa **NIAKHATE** (Fra) (26) 08.03.96
26 Scott **McKENNA** (Sco) (25) 12.11.96
27 Omar **RICHARDS** (24) 15.02.98
28 Loic **BADE** (Fra) (22) 11.04.00
30 Willy **BOLY** (Civ) (31) 03.02.91
32 **RENAN LODI** (Bra) (24) 08.04.98
Serge **AURIER** (Civ) (24) 24.12.92

MIDFIELDERS
5 Orel **MANGALA** (Bel) (24) 18.03.98
8 Jack **COLBACK** (32) 24.10.89
10 Morgan **GIBBS-WHITE** (22) 27.01.00
11 Jesse **LINGARD** (29) 15.12.92
14 Lewis **O'BRIEN** (23) 14.10.98
18 **CAFU** (Por) (29) 26.02.93
21 Cheikhou **KOUYATE** (Sen) (32) 21.12.89
22 Ryan **YATES** (24) 21.11.97
23 Remo **FREULER** (Sui) (30) 15.04.92

FORWARDS
9 Taiwo **AWONIYI** (Nga) (25) 12.08.97
16 Sam **SURRIDGE** (24) 28.07.98
20 Brennan **JOHNSON** (Wal) (21) 23.05.01
25 Emmanuel **DENNIS** (Nga) (24) 15.11.97
33 Lyle **TAYLOR** (Msr) (32) 29.03.90

MANAGER
Steve **COOPER** (Wal) (42) 10.12.79

SOUTHAMPTON

GOALKEEPERS
1 Alex **McCARTHY** (32) 03.12.89
13 Willy **CABALLERO** (Arg) (41) 28.09.81
31 Gavin **BAZUNU** (Ire) (20) 20.02.02

DEFENDERS
2 Kyle **WALKER-PETERS** (25) 13.04.97
4 **LYANCO** (Bra) (25) 01.02.97
6 Duje **CALETA-CAR** (Cro) (26) 17.09.96
15 Romain **PERRAUD** (Fra) (25) 22.09.97
21 Tino **LIVRAMENTO** (19) 12.11.02
22 Mohammed **SALISU** (Gha) (23) 17.04.99
28 Juan **LARIOS** (Spa) (18) 12.01.04
37 Armel **BELLA-KOTCHAP** (Ger) (20) 11.12.01

MIDFIELDERS
3 Ainsley **MAITLAND-NILES** (25) 29.08.97
7 Joe **ARIBO** (Nga) (26) 21.07.96
8 James **WARD-PROWSE** (27) 01.11.94
17 Stuart **ARMSTRONG** (Sco) (30) 30.03.92
19 Moussa **DJENEPO** (Mli) (24) 15.06.98
24 Mohamed **ELYOUNOUSSI** (Nor) (28) 04.08.94
27 Ibrahima **DIALLO** (Fra) (23) 08.03.99
45 Romeo **LAVIA** (Bel) (18) 06.01.04

FORWARDS
9 Adam **ARMSTRONG** (25) 10.02.97
10 Che **ADAMS** (Sco) (26) 13.07.96
18 Sekou **MARA** (Fra) (20) 30.07.02
23 Samuel **EDOZIE** (19) 28.01.03
32 Theo **WALCOTT** (33) 16.03.89

MANAGER
Ralph **HASENHUTTL** (Aut) (55) 09.08.67

TOTTENHAM

GOALKEEPERS
1 Hugo **LLORIS** (Fra) (35) 26.12.86
20 Fraser **FORSTER** (34) 17.03.88
40 Brandon **AUSTIN** (23) 08.01.99

DEFENDERS
2 Matt **DOHERTY** (Ire) (30) 16.01.92
6 Davinson **SANCHEZ** (Col) (26) 12.06.96
12 **EMERSON ROYAL** (Bra) (23) 14.01.99
15 Eric **DIER** (28) 15.01.94
17 Cristian **ROMERO** (Arg) (24) 27.04.98
24 Djed **SPENCE** (22) 09.08.00
25 Japhet **TANGANGA** (23) 31.03.99
33 Ben **DAVIES** (Wal) (29) 24.04.93
34 Clement **LENGLET** (Fra) (27) 17.06.95

MIDFIELDERS
4 Oliver **SKIPP** (22) 16.09.00
5 Pierre-Emile **HOJBJERG** (Den) (27) 05.08.95
14 Ivan **PERISIC** (Cro) (33) 02.02.89
19 Ryan **SESSEGNON** (22) 18.05.00
29 Pape Matar **SARR** (Sen) (20) 14.09.02
30 Rodrigo **BENTANCUR** (Uru) (25) 25.06.97
38 Yves **BISSOUMA** (Mli) (26) 30.08.96
42 Harvey **WHITE** (21) 19.09.01

FORWARDS
7 Heung-min **SON** (Kor) (30) 08.07.92
9 **RICHARLISON** (Bra) (25) 10.05.97
10 Harry **KANE** (29) 28.07.93
11 Bryan **GIL** (Spa) (21) 11.02.01
21 Dejan **KULUSEVSKI** (Swe) (22) 25.04.00
27 **LUCAS MOURA** (Bra) (30) 13.08.92

MANAGER
Antonio **CONTE** (Ita) (53) 31.07.69

WEST HAM UTD

GOALKEEPERS
1 Lukasz **FABIANSKI** (Pol) (37) 18.04.85
13 Alphonse **AREOLA** (Fra) (29) 27.02.93
35 Darren **RANDOLPH** (Ire) (35) 12.05.87

DEFENDERS
2 Ben **JOHNSON** (22) 24.01.00
3 Aaron **CRESSWELL** (32) 15.12.89
4 Kurt **ZOUMA** (Fra) (27) 27.10.94
5 Vladimir **COUFAL** (Cze) (30) 22.08.92
15 Craig **DAWSON** (32) 06.05.90
21 Angelo **OGBONNA** (Ita) (34) 23.05.88
24 Thilo **KEHRER** (Ger) (26) 21.09.96
27 Nayef **AGUERD** (Mar) (26) 30.03.96
33 **EMERSON** (Ita) (28) 03.08.94

MIDFIELDERS
8 Pablo **FORNALS** (Spa) (26) 22.02.96
10 Manuel **LANZINI** (Arg) (29) 15.02.93
11 Lucas **PAQUETA** (Bra) (25) 27.08.97
12 Flynn **DOWNES** (23) 20.01.99
28 Tomas **SOUCEK** (Cze) (27) 27.02.95
32 Conor **COVENTRY** (Ire) (22) 25.03.00
41 Declan **RICE** (23) 14.01.99

FORWARDS
7 Gianluca **SCAMACCA** (Ita) (23) 01.01.99
9 Michail **ANTONIO** (Jam) (32) 28.03.90
14 Maxwel **CORNET** (Civ) (26) 27.09.96
20 Jarrod **BOWEN** (25) 20.12.96
22 Said **BENRAHMA** (Alg) (27) 10.08.95

MANAGER
David **MOYES** (Sco) (59) 25.04.63

WOLVES

GOALKEEPERS
1 Jose **SA** (Por) (29) 17.01.93
13 Matija **SARKIC** (Mne) (25) 23.07.97

DEFENDERS
3 Rayan **AIT NOURI** (Fra) (21) 06.06.01
4 Nathan **COLLINS** (Ire) (21) 30.04.01
14 Yerson **MOSQUERA** (Col) (21) 02.05.01
19 **JONNY** (Spa) (28) 03.03.94
22 Nelson **SEMEDO** (Por) (28) 16.11.93
23 Max **KILMAN** (25) 23.05.97
24 **TOTI** (Por) (23) 16.01.99

MIDFIELDERS
6 Boubacar **TRAORE** (Mli) (21) 20.08.01
8 Ruben **NEVES** (Por) (25) 13.03.97
25 Connor **RONAN** (Ire) (24) 06.03.98
27 Matheus **NUNES** (Por) (24) 27.08.98
28 Joao **MOUTINHO** (Por) (36) 08.09.86

FORWARDS
7 Pedro **NETO** (Por) (22) 09.03.00
9 Raul **JIMENEZ** (Mex) (31) 05.05.91
10 Daniel **PODENCE** (Por) (26) 21.10.95
11 Hee-chan **HWANG** (Kor) (26) 26.01.96
17 Goncalo **GUEDES** (Por) (25) 29.11.96
18 Sasa **KALAJDZIC** (Aut) (25) 07.07.97
20 **CHIQUINHO** (Por) (22) 05.02.00
29 **DIEGO COSTA** (Spa) (33) 07.10.88
37 **ADAMA** Traore (Spa) (26) 25.01.96

MANAGER
Bruno **LAGE** (Por) (46) 12.05.76

(Ages as of 30.09.22)

Club Football

EUROPE

2022-23 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Sep 7 – Amsterdam
Ajax 4 (Alvarez 17, Berghuis 32, Kudus 33, Bergwijn 80)
Rangers 0

Sep 7 – Naples
Napoli 4 (Zielinski 5 pen, 47, Zambo Anguissa 31, Simeone 44)
Liverpool 1 (Diaz 49)

Sep 13 – Liverpool
Liverpool 2 (Salah 17, Matip 89)
Ajax 1 (Kudus 27)

Sep 14 – Glasgow
Rangers 0
Napoli 3 (Politano 68 pen, Raspadori 85, Ndombele 90+1)

Group B

Sep 7 – Madrid
Atl Madrid 2 (Hermoso 90+1, Griezmann 90+11)
Porto 1 (Uribe 90+6 pen)

Sep 7 – Brugge
Club Brugge 1 (Sylla 42)
Bayer Leverkusen 0

Sep 13 – Porto
Porto 0
Club Brugge 4 (Jutgla 15 pen, Sowah 47, Skov Olsen 52, Nusa 89)

Sep 13 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen 2 (Andrich 84, Diaby 87)
Atletico Madrid 0

Group C

Sep 7 – Barcelona
Barcelona 5 (Kessie 13, Lewandowski 34, 45+3, 67, Torres 71)
Viktoria Plzen 1 (Sykora 44)

Sep 7 – Milan
Internazionale 0
Bayern Munich 2 (Sane 25, D'Ambrosio 66 og)

Sep 13 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen 0
Internazionale 2 (Dzeko 20, Dumfries 70)

Sep 13 – Munich
Bayern Munich 2 (Hernandez 50, Sane 54)
Barcelona 0

Group D

Sep 7 – Frankfurt
Eintracht Frankfurt 0
Sporting 3 (Edwards 65, Trincao 67, Santos 82)

Sep 7 – London
Tottenham 2 (Richarlison 76, 81)
Marseille 0

Sep 13 – Lisbon
Sporting 2 (Paulinho 90, Arthur 90+3)
Tottenham 0

Sep 13 – Marseille
Marseille 0
Eintracht Frankfurt 1 (Lindstrom 43)

Group E

Sep 6 – Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb 1 (Orsic 13)
Chelsea 0

Sep 6 – Salzburg
Red Bull Salzburg 1 (Okafor 28)
Milan 1 (Saelemaekers 40)

Sep 14 – Milan
Milan 3 (Giroud 45 pen, Saelemaekers 47, Pobega 77)
Dinamo Zagreb 1 (Orsic 56)

Sep 14 – London
Chelsea 1 (Sterling 48)
Red Bull Salzburg 1 (Okafor 75)

Group F

Sep 6 – Glasgow
Celtic 0
Real Madrid 3 (Vinicius Jr 56, Modric 60, Hazard 77)

Sep 6 – Leipzig
RB Leipzig 1 (Simakan 57)
Shakhtar 4 (Shved 16, 58, Mudryk 76, Traore 85)

Sep 14 – Warsaw
Shakhtar Donetsk 1 (Mudryk 29)
Celtic 1 (Bondarenko 10 og)

Sep 14 – Madrid
Real Madrid 2 (Valverde 80, Asensio 90+1)
RB Leipzig 0

Group G

Sep 6 – Dortmund
Dortmund 3 (Reus 35, Guerreiro 42, Bellingham 83)
Copenhagen 0

Sep 6 – Seville
Sevilla 0
Man City 4 (Haaland 20, 67, Foden 58, Dias 90+2)

Sep 14 – Manchester
Manchester City 2 (Stones 80, Haaland 84)
Dortmund 1 (Bellingham 56)

Sep 14 – Copenhagen
Copenhagen 0
Sevilla 0

Group H

Sep 6 – Paris
PSG 2 (Mbappe 5, 22)
Juventus 1 (McKennie 53)

Sep 6 – Lisbon
Benfica 2 (Rafa Silva 50, Grimaldo 54)
Maccabi Haifa 0

Sep 14 – Turin
Juventus 1 (Milik 4)
Benfica 2 (Joao Mario 43 pen, Neres 55)

Sep 14 – Haifa
Maccabi Haifa 1 (Chery 24)
PSG 3 (Messi 37, Mbappe 69, Neymar 88)

2022-23 EUROPA LEAGUE

Group A

Sep 8 – St Gallen
Zurich 1 (Kryeziu 44 pen)
Arsenal 2 (Marquinhos 16, Nketiah 62)

Sep 8 – Eindhoven
PSV 1 (Gakpo 62)
Bodo/Glimt 1 (Gronbaek 44)

Sep 15 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt 2 (Selnaes 54 og, Vetlesen 58)
Zurich 1 (Gronbaek 44)

Group B

Sep 8 – Larnaca
AEK Larnaca 1 (Oier 33)
Rennes 2 (Theate 29, Assignon 90+4)

Sep 8 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce 2 (G. Henrique 35, Batshuayi 90+1)
Dynamo Kyiv 1 (Tsygankov 63)

Sep 15 – Krakow
Dynamo Kyiv 0
AEK Larnaca 1 (Gyurcso 8)

Sep 15 – Rennes
Rennes 2 (Terrier 52, Majer 54)
Fenerbahce 2 (Kahveci 60, Valencia 90+2 pen)

Group C

Sep 8 – Razgrad
Ludogorets 2 (Cauly 72, Nonato 88)
Roma 1 (Shomurodov 86)

Sep 8 – Helsinki
HJK 0
Real Betis 2 (Willian Jose 45+3 pen, 64)

Sep 15 – Seville
Betis 3 (L. Henrique 25, Joaquin 39, Canales 59)
Ludogorets 2 (Despodov 45+1, Rick 74)

Sep 15 – Rome
Roma 3 (Dybala 47, Pellegrini 49, Belotti 68)
HJK 0

Group D

Sep 8 – Malmo
Malmo 0
Braga 2 (Rodrigues 30, R. Horta 70 pen)

Sep 8 – Berlin
Union Berlin 0
Union Saint-Gilloise 1 (Lynen 39)

Sep 15 – Leuven
Union SG 3 (Burgess 17, Teuma 69, Boniface 71)
Malmo 2 (Ceesay 6, Kiese Thelin 57)

Sep 15 – Braga
Braga 1 (Vitinha 77)
Union Berlin 0

Group E

Sep 8 – Manchester
Manchester United 0
Real Sociedad 1 (Mendez 59 pen)

Sep 8 – Nicosia
Omonia Nicosia 0
Sheriff 3 (Akanbi 2, Atiemwen 55 pen, Diop 76)

Sep 15 – Chisinau
Sheriff Tiraspol 0
Manchester United 2 (Sancho 17, Ronaldo 39 pen)

Sep 15 – San Sebastian
Real Sociedad 2 (Guevara 30, Sorloth 80)
Omonia Nicosia 1 (Bruno 72)

Group F

Sep 8 – Rome
Lazio 4 (Alberto 4, Anderson 15, Vecino 28, 63)
Feyenoord 2 (Gimenez 69 pen, 88)

Sep 8 – Graz
Sturm Graz 1 (Emegha 8)
Midtjylland 0

Sep 15 – Herning
Midtjylland 5 (Paulinho 26, Kaba 30, Evander 52 pen, Isaksen 67, Sviatchenko 72)
Lazio 1 (Milinkovic-Savic 57)

Sep 15 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord 6 Jahanbakhsh 9, 41, Hancko 31, Danilo 34, Gimenez 66, Idrissi 78)
Sturm Graz 0

Group G

Sep 8 – Nantes
Nantes 2 (Mohamed 32, Guessand 90+3)
Olympiakos 1 (Moutoussamy 50 og)

Sep 8 – Freiburg
Freiburg 2 (Grifo 7 pen, Doan 15)
Qarabag 1 (Vesovic 39)

Sep 15 – Piraeus
Olympiakos 0
Freiburg 3 (Hofler 5, Gregoritsch 25, 52)

Sep 15 – Baku
Qarabag 3 (Owusu 60, Zoubir 65, Jankovic 72)
Nantes 0

Group H

Sep 8 – Belgrade
Red Star Belgrade 0
Monaco 1 (Embolo 74 pen)

Sep 8 – Budapest
Ferencvaros 3 (Nguen 5, 44 pen, Traore 29)
Trabzonspor 2 (Gomez 39, Bozok 71)

Sep 15 – Trabzon
Trabzonspor 2 (Hamsik 16, Trezeguet 68)
Red Star Belgrade 1 (Nikolic 89)

Sep 15 – Monaco
Monaco 0
Ferencvaros 1 (Vecsei 80)

2022-23 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Group A

Sep 8 – Florence
Fiorentina 1 (Barak 56)
RFS 1 (Ilic 74)

Sep 8 – Edinburgh
Hearts 0
Istanbul Basaksehir 4 (Kaldirim 26, Ndayishimiye 67, Okaka 75, Ozcan 82)

Sep 15 – Riga
RFS 0
Hearts 2 (Shankland 43 pen, Forrest 90+3)

Sep 15 – Istanbul
Istanbul Basaksehir 3 (Gurler 57, 71, Traore 90)
Fiorentina 0

Group B

Sep 8 – Brussels
Anderlecht 1 (Silva 80 pen)
Silkeborg 0

Sep 8 – London
West Ham 3 (Bowen 69 pen, Emerson 74, Antonio 90)
FCSB 1 (Cordea 34)

Sep 15 – Bucharest
FCSB 0
Anderlecht 0

Sep 15 – Silkeborg
Silkeborg 2 (Kusk 5, Tengstedt 75)
West Ham United 3 (Lanzini 13 pen, Scamacca 25, Dawson 38)

Group C

Sep 8 – Valencia
Villarreal 4 (Chukwueze 32, Baena 36, 40, Coquelin 89)
Lech Poznan 3 (Skoras 2, Ishak 46 pen, 61)

Sep 8 – Vienna
Austria Vienna 0
Hapoel Be'er Sheva 0

Sep 15 – Be'er Sheva
Hapoel Be'er Sheva 1 (Hatuel 63)
Villarreal 2 (Morales 28 pen, Baena 67)

Sep 15 – Poznan
Lech Poznan 4 (Ishak 27, Skoras 64, Velde 76, 90)
Austria Vienna 1 (Braunoder 29)

Group D

Sep 8 – Uherske Hradiste
Slovacko 3 (Kalabiska 5, 19, Kozak 83)
Partizan Belgrade 3 (Diabate 47, 53, Gomes 62)

Sep 8 – Nice
Nice 1 (Delort 62 pen)
Cologne 1 (Tigges 19)

Sep 15 – Belgrade
Partizan Belgrade 1 (Diabate 60)
Nice 1 (Bryan 2)

Sep 15 – Cologne
Cologne 4 (Adamyan 10, Dietz 42, Ljubicic 65 pen, 74)
Slovacko 2 (Kalabiska 49, Petrzela 52)

Group E

Sep 8 – Kosice
Dnipro-1 0
AZ 1 (D. De Wit 63)

Sep 8 – Vaduz
Vaduz 0
Apollon Limassol 0

Sep 15 – Nicosia
Apollon Limassol 1 (Pittas 58)
Dnipro-1 3 (Rubchynskyi 11, Dovbyk 26, 45)

Sep 15 – Alkmaar
AZ 4 (Barasi 19, Beukema 81, Sugawara 90+2, D. De Wit 90+5)
Vaduz 1 (Goelzer 22)

Group F

Sep 8 – Molde
Molde 0
Gent 0

Sep 8 – Dublin
Shamrock Rovers 0
Djurgardens 0

Sep 15 – Stockholm
Djurgardens 3 (Doumbouya 50, Banda 58, Asoro 90+1)
Molde 2 (Fofana 39 pen, Breivik 77)

Sep 15 – Gent
Gent 3 (Cuypers 9, Odjidja-Ofoe 18, 65)
Shamrock Rovers 0

Group G

Sep 8 – Pristina
Ballkani 1 (Thaqi 65)
CFR Cluj 1 (Matias 90+1)

Sep 8 – Sivas
Sivasspor 1 (Saba 27)
Slavia Prague 1 (Olayinka 4)

Sep 15 – Cluj
CFR Cluj 0
Sivasspor 1 (Gradel 28 pen)

Sep 15 – Prague
Slavia Prague 3 (Frasheri 26 og, Olayinka 34, Masopust 41)
Ballkani 2 (Krasniqi 23, Korenica 29)

Group H

Sep 8 – Basel
Basel 3 (Males 23 pen, Burger 54, 76)
Pyunik 1 (Dashyan 27)

Sep 8 – Bratislava
Slovan Bratislava 0
Zalgiris 0

Sep 15 – Vilnius
Zalgiris 0
Basel 1 (Zeqiri 63)

Sep 15 – Yerevan
Pyunik 2 (Dashyan 35, Otubanjo 37)
Slovan Bratislava 0

AFRICA

2022 CAF SUPER CUP

Sep 10 – Rabat
Wydad 0
RS Berkane 2 (El Bahri 32, El Moudane 71 pen)

EGYPT

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zamalek (C)	34	24	5	5	62	29	77
Pyramids	34	22	5	7	56	25	71
Al Ahly	34	20	10	4	62	21	70
El Geish	34	14	14	6	27	24	56
Future	34	16	8	10	49	34	56
Smouha	34	11	14	9	44	45	47
National Bank of Egypt	34	11	13	10	40	41	46
Pharco	34	9	15	10	21	22	42
ENPPI	34	8	15	11	37	39	39
Al Mokawloon	34	8	14	12	30	31	38
Ismaily	34	9	11	14	27	39	38
Al Ittihad	34	9	11	14	40	52	38
Al Masry	34	8	14	12	40	41	38
Ceramica Cleopatra	34	7	16	11	34	41	37
Ghazl El Mehalla	34	7	15	12	26	37	36
El Gouna (R)	34	9	9	16	33	46	36
El Sharqia Dokhan (R)	34	7	12	15	33	56	33
Misr Lel Makkasa (R)	34	2	9	23	12	50	15

ASIA

2022 AFC CUP

West Asia Zone

Semi-Finals

Sep 5-6: Al Arabi 1-2 Al Seeb (AET); East Riffa 1-1p Al Riffa (AET)

Inter-Zone Play-Offs

Semi-Finals

Sep 6-7: Sogdiana Jizzakh 1-0 Eastern; ATK Mohun Bagan 1-3 Kuala Lumpur City

BANGLADESH

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bashundhara Kings (C)	22	18	3	1	53	21	57
Abahani Dhaka	22	14	5	3	55	31	47
Saif	22	11	4	7	58	37	37
Sheikh Jamal	22	9	8	5	34	31	35
Mohammedan Dhaka	22	8	9	5	39	26	33
Sheikh Russel	22	8	7	7	35	31	31
Abahani Chittagong	22	8	7	7	39	42	31
Bangladesh Police	22	8	6	8	28	32	30
Muktijoddha SKC	22	5	4	13	27	42	19
Rahmatgonj MFS	22	4	6	12	33	46	18
Baridhara (R)	22	3	5	14	24	58	14
Swadhinata KS (R)	22	2	4	16	22	50	10

CONCACAF

2022 CONCACAF LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Sep 7-8: Motagua 0-0 Tauro; Diriangen 0-4 Olimpia; Real Espana 3-1 Herediano; Alianza 0-1 Alajualense

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Sep 13-15: Tauro 0-0 Motagua (agg 0-0p); Olimpia 3-1 Diriangen (agg 7-1); Herediano 1-1 Real Espana (agg 2-4); Alajualense 2-0 Alianza (agg 3-0)

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico Pantoja*	8	6	0	2	17	10	18
Cibao*	8	3	3	2	10	10	12
Moca*	8	2	5	1	7	6	11
Vega Real*	8	3	2	3	10	13	11
Universidad O&M	8	2	3	3	11	9	9
Jarabacoa	8	0	3	5	7	14	3

*Qualify for the final stages

GRENADA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Hurricanes (C)	18	15	2	1	57	13	47
Paradise	18	14	3	1	54	15	45
Camerhogne	18	9	4	5	43	25	31
Hard Rock	18	8	4	6	36	30	28
Queens Park Rangers	18	9	1	8	35	35	28
St. John's	18	7	5	6	39	30	26
Mt. Rich	18	6	1	11	30	52	19
Chantimelle*	17	5	0	12	19	50	15
SAB Spartans (R)	18	3	3	12	20	40	12
Eagles Super Strikers (R)	17	0	3	14	13	56	3

*Enter the relegation play-offs

SOUTH AMERICA

2022 COPA LIBERTADORES

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Aug 30 – Curitiba
Athletico Paranaense 1 (Alex Santana 23)
Palmeiras 0

Aug 31 – Buenos Aires
Velez Sarsfield 0
Flamengo 4 (Pedro 32, 61, 83, Everton Ribeiro 45+1)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Sep 6 – Sao Paulo
Palmeiras 2 (Scarpa 3, Gomez 55)
Athletico Paranaense 2 (Pablo 64, Terans 85)
Athletico Paranaense win 3-2 on aggregate

Sep 7 – Rio deJaniero
Flamengo 2 (Pedro 42, Marinho 68)
Velez Sarsfield 1 (Pratto 21)
Flamengo win 6-1 on aggregate

2022 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Aug 31 – Quito
Independiente del Valle 3 (Schunke 29, Faravelli 67, Diaz 69)
Melgar 0

Sep 1 – Goiania
Atletico Goianiense 3 (Jorginho 11, Shaylon 56, Leo Pereira 78)
Sao Paulo 1 (Luciano 23)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Sep 7 – Arequipa
Melgar 0
Independiente del Valle 3 (Diaz 28, 53, Segovia 87)
Independiente del Valle win 6-0 on aggregate

Sep 8 – Sao Paulo
Sao Paulo 2 (Patrick 4, 63)
Atletico Goianiense 0
3-3 on aggregate. Sao Paulo win 4-2 on penalties

OCEANIA

NEW ZEALAND

Northern League

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Auckland City*	22	20	1	1	68	16	61
Birkenhead United*	22	16	2	4	56	24	50
Auckland United*	22	15	4	3	60	22	49
Melville United*	22	15	0	7	55	22	45
Hamilton Wanderers	22	10	4	8	46	32	34
Western Springs	22	8	6	8	44	47	30
Manukau United	22	9	1	12	36	46	28
Bay Olympic	22	7	2	13	34	46	23
Takapuna	22	5	6	11	31	43	21
Eastern Suburbs	22	5	5	12	24	36	20
Waiheke United (R)	22	1	5	16	19	63	8
North Shore United (R)	22	2	2	18	18	94	8

*Qualify for the National League Championship

Central League

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wellington Olympic*	17	13	3	1	70	15	42
Miramar Rangers*	17	12	4	1	63	18	40
Wellington Phoenix Reserves*	18	10	3	5	32	17	33
Napier City Rovers*	18	8	4	6	35	28	28
Waterside Karori	18	7	5	6	33	29	26
Petone	18	5	4	9	24	39	19
North Wellington	18	5	3	10	31	44	18
Wellington United	18	5	3	10	22	40	18
Western Suburbs	18	4	2	12	21	66	14
Havelock North Wanderers (R)	18	3	3	12	21	56	12

*Qualify for the National League Championship

Southern League

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Christchurch United*	18	16	1	1	74	12	49
Cashmere Technical*	18	16	1	1	79	20	49
Nelson Suburbs	18	10	3	5	40	35	33
Dunedin City Royals	18	10	1	7	46	35	31
Ferrymead Bays	18	9	3	6	37	30	30
Coastal Spirit	18	3	7	8	34	43	16
Nomads United	18	4	3	11	28	57	15
Green Island	18	4	1	13	27	61	13
Selwyn United	18	2	5	11	27	48	11
Mosgiel (R)	18	2	3	13	21	72	9

*Qualify for the National League Championship

Internationals

CHAN 2022 QUALIFIERS

Western Zone A

Second Round

Aug 27-29: Senegal 1-0 Guinea; Sierra Leone 1-2 Mali; Guinea-Bissau 0-1 Mauritania
Sep 2-3: Guinea 1-0 Senegal (agg 1-1p); Mali 2-0 Sierra Leone (agg 4-1); Mauritania 1-0 Guinea-Bissau (agg 2-0)

Western Zone B

Second Round

Aug 27-28: Ivory Coast 0-0 Burkina Faso; Togo 1-0 Niger; Ghana 2-0 Nigeria
Sep 3-4: Burkina Faso 0-0 Ivory Coast (agg 0-0p); Niger 3-1 Togo (agg 3-2); Nigeria 2-0 Ghana (agg 2-2p)

Central Zone

First Round

Aug 28: Central African Republic 2-1 Congo; Equatorial Guinea 1-0 Cameroon; Chad 1-2 DR Congo
Sep 4: Congo 1-0 Central African Republic (agg a2-2); Cameroon 2-0 Equatorial Guinea (agg 2-1); DR Congo 5-0 Chad (agg 7-1)

Central-East Zone

Second Round

Aug 26-28: Ethiopia 0-0 Rwanda; Tanzania 0-1 Uganda; Djibouti 1-4 Sudan
Sep 2-3: Rwanda 0-1 Ethiopia (agg 0-1); Uganda 3-0 Tanzania (agg 4-0); Sudan 3-2 Djibouti (agg 7-3)

Southern Zone

Second Round

Aug 27-28: Angola 2-0 South Africa; Botswana 0-1 Madagascar; Malawi 1-1 Mozambique
Sep 2-4: South Africa 1-4 Angola (agg 1-6); Madagascar 1-1 Botswana (agg 1-2); Mozambique 0-0 Malawi (agg a1-1)

FRIENDLIES

Aug 21 – Adama
Ethiopia 0
Uganda 0

Aug 22 – Bamako
Mali 0
Guinea 0

Aug 26 – Wiener Neustadt
Qatar 1 (Muneer 83)
Jamaica 1 (Fletcher 70)

Sep1 – Atlanta
Mexico 0
Paraguay 1 (D. Gonzalez 50)

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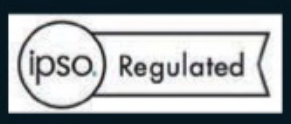

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